617 SQUADRON 80TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL

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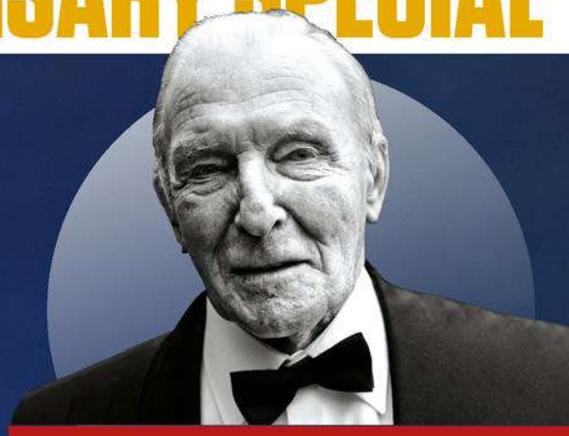

'JOHNNY' JOHNSON
Tribute to the 'Last Dambuster'

1943-2023

DAMBUSTERS

OFFICIAL HISTORIAN ON THE FORGOTTEN MEN OF 617 SQUADRON

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WWII MINESWEEPERS
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***Above:** Barnes Wallis' innovative 'bouncing bomb' undergoes tests before the raid*

CONTRIBUTORS

DR ROBERT OWEN

Dr Owen is 617 Squadron's official historian and the author of several books on the history of the squadron. Starting on page 24 he uncovers what happened next for several of the Bomber Command aircrew who took part in Operation Chastise.

JAMES HOLLAND

The renowned WWII historian, podcaster, festival director and broadcaster spoke with *History of War*'s Tom Garner about his latest book, *The Second World War: An Illustrated History*, as well as the Chalke Valley History Festival 2023 (p40).

NICK SOLDINGER

In *Great Battles* Nick looks at the clash between the Italian 2nd Army and the Austro-Hungarian and German 14th Army, in the Battle of Caporetto. The devastating defeat pushed the Italian frontline back over 90 miles (145km), while the huge casualties haunted the nation for decades (p48).

Welcome

The RAF raid on the dams in the Ruhr valley, 80 years ago this month, remains one of the most iconic British aerial operations – celebrated for the skill of the aircrew involved, as well as the innovation of Barnes Wallis' 'bouncing bomb'. The hugely popular 1955 movie solidified the legend of 617 Squadron, but after the credits rolled on Operation Chastise the men of the squadron returned to their regular, perilous raids over occupied Europe. This issue, Dr Robert Owen, 617 Squadron's official historian, reveals what happened next for several of the aircrew who took part in Chastise – while for some, their war ended tragically early, others continued to distinguish themselves in Bomber Command and were able to share their incredible experiences with the world.

Tim Williamson
Editor-in-Chief

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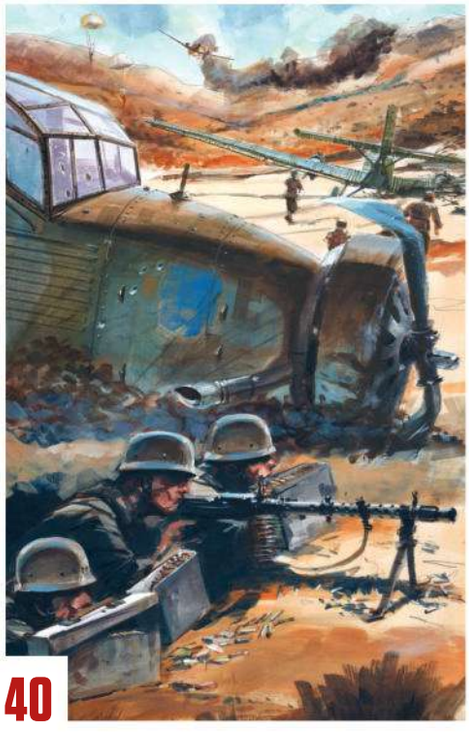

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The flight jacket of WWII pilot Woodrow W Crockett, one of the Tuskegee Airmen

WAR in FOCUS

RICHELIEU AT LA ROCHELLE

Painted: 1881

This dramatic painting by French artist Henri-Paul Motte depicts Cardinal Richelieu at the Siege of La Rochelle during 1627-28. The first minister of state for King Louis XIII of France, Richelieu was extremely powerful. He took personal command against the Protestant Huguenot garrison of La Rochelle on the western coast of France. Despite English relief efforts, Richelieu forced the Huguenots to unconditionally surrender. The siege formed the historical backdrop to Alexandre Dumas' 1844 novel *The Three Musketeers,* with Richelieu portrayed as a Machiavellian antagonist.

© Getty

WAR in FOCUS

THE DAWN PATROL

Released: 1938

Starring Errol Flynn, Basil Rathbone and David Niven, *The Dawn Patrol* was set during the First World War, with its leading men playing Royal Flying Corps fighter pilots. Of the three actors only Rathbone (left) was a First World War veteran, although Niven (centre) served with distinction during the Second World War. Rathbone served in the Liverpool Scottish Regiment as a British Army officer and fought on the Western Front. He was awarded the Military Cross for bravery in September 1918.

© Getty

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WAR in FOCUS

BATTLE OF ZORNDORF

Painted: 1911

Here, German artist Carl Röchling depicts the Battle of Zorndorf. Fought on 25 August 1758 during the Seven Years' War in what is now northwest Poland, Zorndorf was a clash between King Frederick the Great of Prussia and Russian commander General William Fermor. With combined casualties of 28,000, Zorndorf was a bloody engagement, with Frederick personally leading an attack while holding a regimental standard. Despite the triumphal tone of Röchling's painting, the battle was tactically inconclusive and both sides claimed victory.

TIMELINE

WWII SEA MINES

During the Second World War, the Allies and Axis Powers both use naval mines to disrupt and destroy enemy shipping

BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC 01

3 September 1939 – 8 May 1945

The longest continuous campaign of WWII sees Allied and Axis naval forces lay thousands of mines in the Atlantic Ocean. The Allies use mines to blockade Germany, while German and Italian forces use them to disrupt Allied merchant shipping.

1939-45

21 November 1939

7-9 January 1940

3-8 April 1940

HMS Belfast pictured during WWII. It is the largest surviving Royal Navy ship from the war and is permanently moored in central London

HMS BELFAST DAMAGE

British light cruiser HMS Belfast strikes a German mine only a few months after being commissioned. The mine breaks Belfast's keel and wrecks an engine and boiler room. She is not recommissioned for active service until November 1942.

HELIGOLAND BIGHT SINKINGS 02

British submarines HMS Seahorse, HMS Undine and HMS Starfish are sunk by German minesweepers off the northwest coast of Germany. Royal Navy submarine operations in Heligoland Bight are subsequently abandoned.

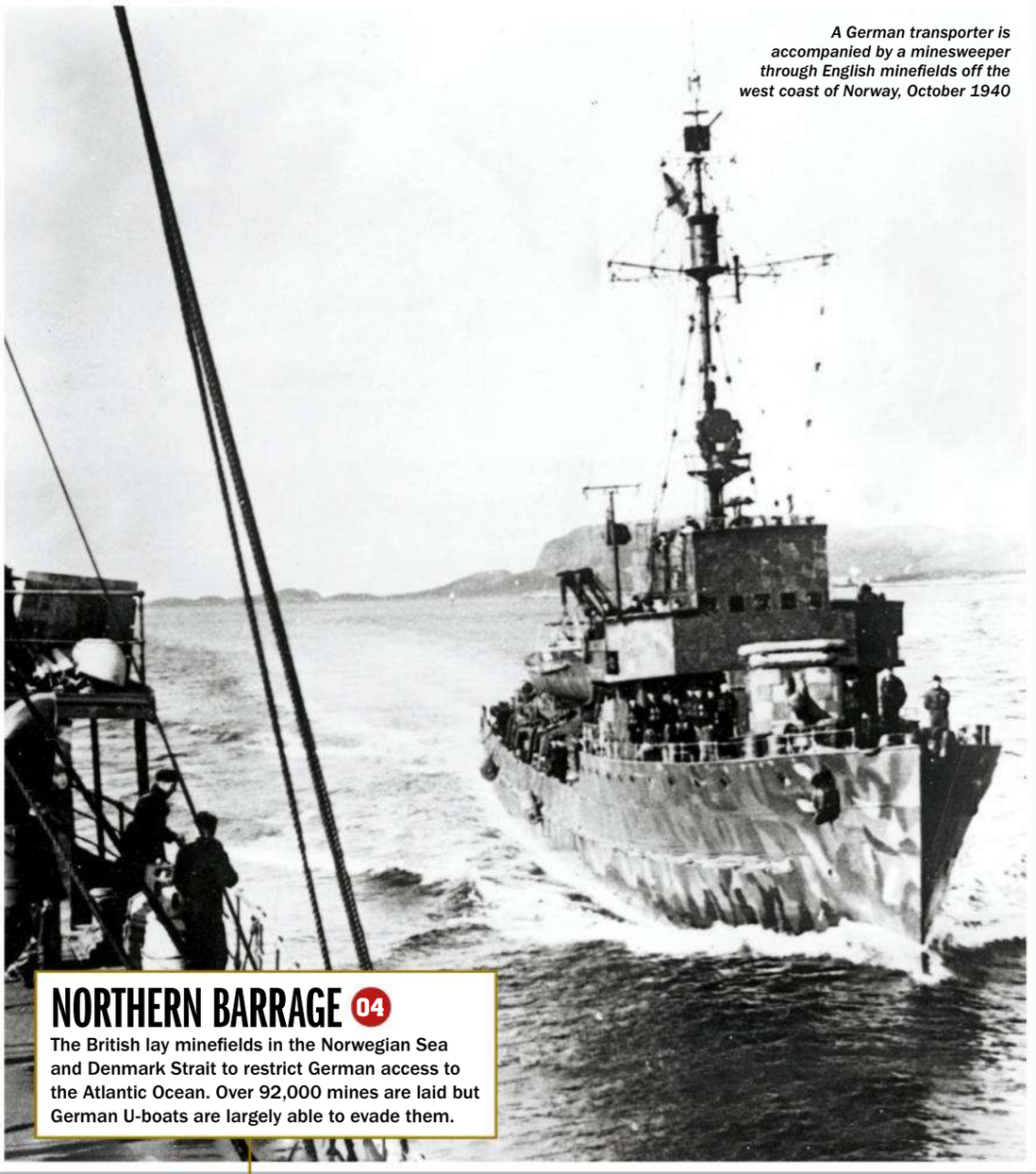
Sailors pictured at work in the engine room of a German minesweeper

OPERATION WILFRED 03

The British launch Operation Wilfred to mine the western coast of Norway to prevent Swedish iron ore being transported through neutral Norwegian waters to sustain the German war effort. The operation is overtaken when Germany invades Norway and Denmark.

A German minesweeper squadron violates Swedish territorial waters to clear a passage through mines laid by the Swedish Navy, April 1940

Royal Navy sailors launch sea mines from a warship



A German transporter is accompanied by a minesweeper through English minefields off the west coast of Norway, October 1940

NORTHERN BARRAGE 04

The British lay minefields in the Norwegian Sea and Denmark Strait to restrict German access to the Atlantic Ocean. Over 92,000 mines are laid but German U-boats are largely able to evade them.

10 May 1940

ESCAPE OF THE DUTCH ROYAL FAMILY

British Vickers Wellington aerial minesweepers use magnetic induction loops to sweep a successful path across the North Sea. This operation enables the Dutch royal family to escape to the UK aboard HMS Hereward.

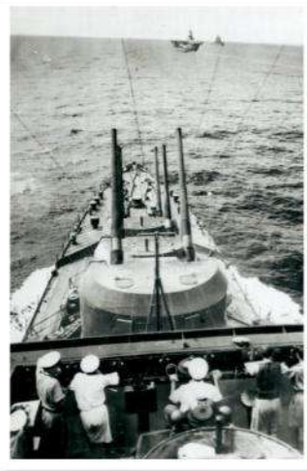
Vickers Wellington DWI bombers are equipped with generators that create a magnetic field to detonate mines

June 1940 – September 1943

10 June 1940 – 2 May 1945

BATTLE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN 05

The Regia Marina (Royal Italian Navy) heavily mines the Strait of Sicily. These minefields sink and damage many Royal Navy ships but Italian vessels also strike mines off North Africa and in the Adriatic Sea.



Its guns ready for action, a British cruiser makes its way in a Mediterranean convoy. In the distance are the aircraft carrier Ark Royal (centre) and the battleship Nelson. 10 December 1941

Images © Alamy, Getty, Wiki / PD / Gov

"THE SOVIETS CANNOT SUCCESSFULLY SWEEP THE MINEFIELD AND 84 OF THEIR VESSELS ARE SUNK OR DAMAGED DURING THE EVACUATION"
HELIGOLAND BIGHT SINKINGS 02
NORTHERN BARRAGE 04
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BATTLE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN 05

1941-45

PACIFIC WAR 06

American-led Allied naval forces plant thousands of mines across dozens of minefields in their campaigns against Japan. The Japanese extensively mine the approaches to the Sea of Japan but their mine warfare is not very effective.

HMAS Terka is an Australian auxiliary minesweeper that operates from Darwin and New Guinea during 1941-45

1941-45

SOVIET MINE WARFARE 07

The Soviet Navy heavily mines the coastline of the Soviet Union in the Baltic Sea and Black Sea. Their minesweepers see combat against German and Finnish ships in the Baltic Sea and Romanian vessels in the Black Sea.

An MT-type Soviet WWII minesweeper pictured being transferred to the Polish Navy as part of war reparations in 1946

26 June 1941 – 25 May 1943

CONTINUATION WAR 08

The Finnish Navy lays mines against the Soviet Navy while cooperating with the German Kriegsmarine. The Finns primarily use two Ruotsinsalmi-class minelayers that often clash with Soviet vessels.

Finnish sailors lay mines from the naval ship Ruotsinsalmi, the namesake of her class of minelayer

OPERATION STARVATION 12

The US Army Air Force launches an aerial mining operation in Japanese territorial waters to disrupt enemy shipping. Thousands of mines are planted by B-29 aircraft over most of Japan's major ports and straits. The operation sinks or damages 670 Japanese ships.

A B-29 from USAAF 9th Bombardment Group drops sea mines over Japanese home waters

D-DAY LANDINGS 10

Allied vessels participate in mine-clearing operations for Operation Neptune. The 350 ships lead the assault forces and sweep ten 'channels' to the Normandy landing beaches so Allied troops can land relatively safely.

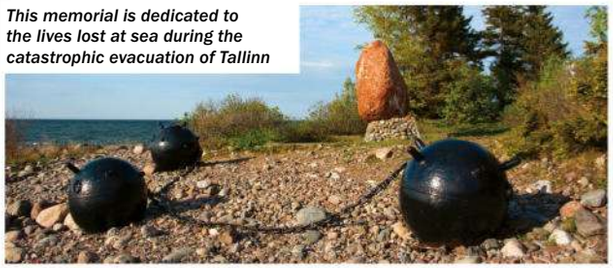
American minesweeper USS Tide (centre) burns off Normandy while two other ships stand by to pick up survivors, 6 June 1944

Images © Alamy, Getty, Wiki / PD / Gov

27-31 August 1941 — 6 June 1944 — 15 September – 27 November 1944 — April 1945

SOVIET EVACUATION OF TALLINN 09

During Operation Barbarossa, Red Army forces are left with no choice but to evacuate Estonia by sea. German and Finnish minelayers plant mines in the Juminda minefield while attacking the trapped Soviets. The Soviets cannot successfully sweep the minefield and 84 of their vessels are sunk or damaged during the evacuation.



This memorial is dedicated to the lives lost at sea during the catastrophic evacuation of Tallinn

BATTLE OF PELELIU 11

Japanese forces heavily mine Palau during the bloody battle for Peleliu Island. Nevertheless, the Americans use TBF Avenger and Lockheed Ventura aircraft to drop mines that close the entrances to Japanese harbours.

US Navy warships provide cover for American troops as they land on Palau

THE NORTHERN BARRAGE

Codenamed Operation SN, the Royal Navy laid a huge minefield in the North Atlantic that ultimately failed to prevent German naval activity against Allied vessels

British sailors place mines into position ready for throwing into the sea, c.1940

Shortly before the Second World War broke out, the United Kingdom began to look to its naval defences. Haunted by the German U-boat campaigns against Allied shipping during the First World War, many in the British establishment (including Winston Churchill) believed that enemy attacks on merchant shipping could again be a serious danger.

Owing to German rearmament during the 1930s, updated U-boats were far more advanced than the Royal Navy's arsenal of anti-submarine countermeasures. As a result, in July 1939 the British decided to lay a huge defensive minefield between the territorial waters of the UK and Norway. Known as the Northern Barrage it would theoretically restrict German naval access to Allied shipping lanes in the Atlantic.

The Northern Barrage was a recreation of the First World War North Sea Mine Barrage that had been primarily laid by the US Navy. During June-October 1918, the Americans (assisted by the Royal Navy) laid over 70,000 mines in an area between the Orkney Islands and Norwegian coast. Yet despite the quantity of mines and the geographical size of the minefield, only four U-boats were sunk, with a further four possibly destroyed. Hundreds of Allied minesweepers were then required to clear the area in 1919.

Nevertheless, the concept for the North Sea Mine Barrage was retained by the British and served as the basis of their designs for the Northern Barrage. Planning for the minefield began in July 1939 with the Royal Navy intending to hamper the passage of U-boats from German home ports into the North Sea and Atlantic. These initial plans effectively copied the First World War area but the successful German invasion of Norway during April-June 1940 meant that the Admiralty had to rethink its strategy.

The Royal Navy was not cowed by the occupation of Norway and in fact increased its plans for the Northern Barrage. Codenamed Operation SN, the navy decided to lay minefields between Orkney and the Faroe Islands as well as towards Iceland. Additional mines would also be laid between northern Scotland and Orkney as well as the Denmark Strait between Iceland and Greenland.

These plans covered a huge geographical area and Operation SN had several objectives. Its main aim was to prevent German vessels, particularly U-boats, from leaving the North Sea and disrupting Allied shipping. The minefields would also help to protect convoys that passed through Scandinavian waters and reduce losses among Allied capital ships – the leading ships in naval fleets.

First Minelaying Squadron

To lay the mines, the Royal Navy converted five liners and cargo ships into minelayers. Known as the First Minelaying Squadron, these ships operated from Kyle of Lochalsh on the northwest Scottish coast and laid their first mines during October-December 1940. In this first mission, the squadron laid over 10,000 conventional sea mines between Iceland and the Faroe Islands. Each minelayer was lightly armed with a small 4in (102mm) gun and an anti-aircraft gun, which meant that they required substantial naval protection. At various times the squadron's protectors included ships such as HMS Belfast, which was heavily damaged by a German mine, and HMS Hood, which was later sunk by the German battleship Bismarck.

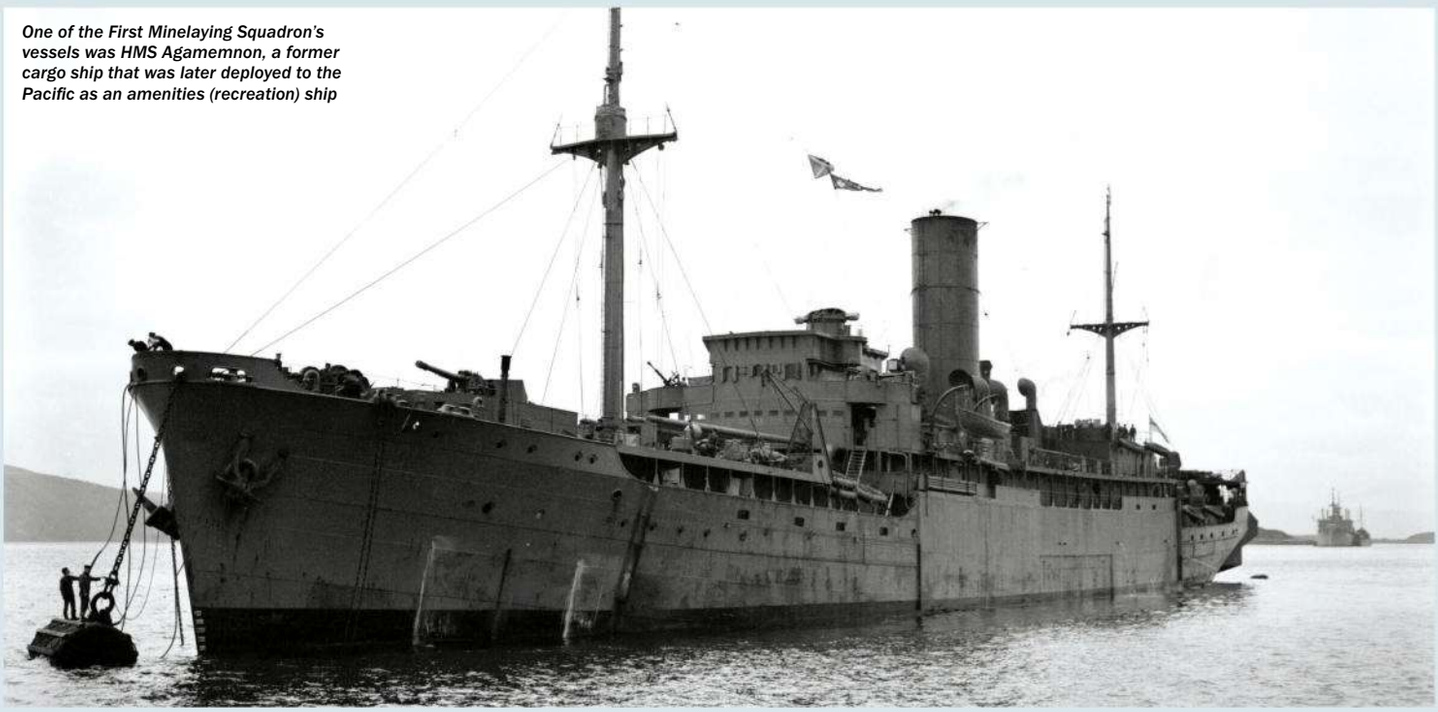
"DESPITE THE SIZE OF THE OPERATION, THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE NORTHERN BARRAGE WAS EVENTUALLY QUESTIONED BY THE ADMIRALTY"

The minelayers laid Buoyant Anchored mines. These held explosive charges, detonators and firing mechanisms within a steel hemisphere and were laid at different depths and distances. This was so they could prioritise targeting either enemy submarines or surface vessels. The mines were initially ignited by conventional contact but as magnetic technology improved they could be laid in reduced numbers.

The First Minelaying Squadron eventually laid over 110,000 mines in the barrage. Across dozens of operations during October 1940 to September 1943, the squadron could lay as many as 2,600 mines in a single mission. Operation SN was ultimately responsible for 35 percent of all British mining operations during the Second World War.

Despite the size of the operation, the effectiveness of the Northern Barrage was eventually questioned by the Admiralty. German naval forces continued to enter the North Atlantic, particularly when they could launch raids from more southerly ports in occupied France. The number of U-boats sunk by the mines was impossible to verify, although the barrage may have destroyed five German submarines that were reported missing. Moreover, reduced Allied merchant shipping losses in and around the barrage was probably attributable to improved tactics against U-boats rather than direct losses from mines.

The only significant success of the barrage was its inadvertent role in sinking the Bismarck. After sinking HMS Hood in the Denmark Strait on 24 May 1941, Bismarck was detected sailing through minefield SN 71B. This enabled the Royal Navy to track and ultimately sink it 350 miles (563km) west of Brest on 27 May 1941. Despite this success, the Bismarck had not been sunk in the barrage itself. For these comparatively small gains, and with U-boats becoming less of a threat, Operation SN was discontinued and First Minelaying Squadron was disbanded on 26 September 1943.

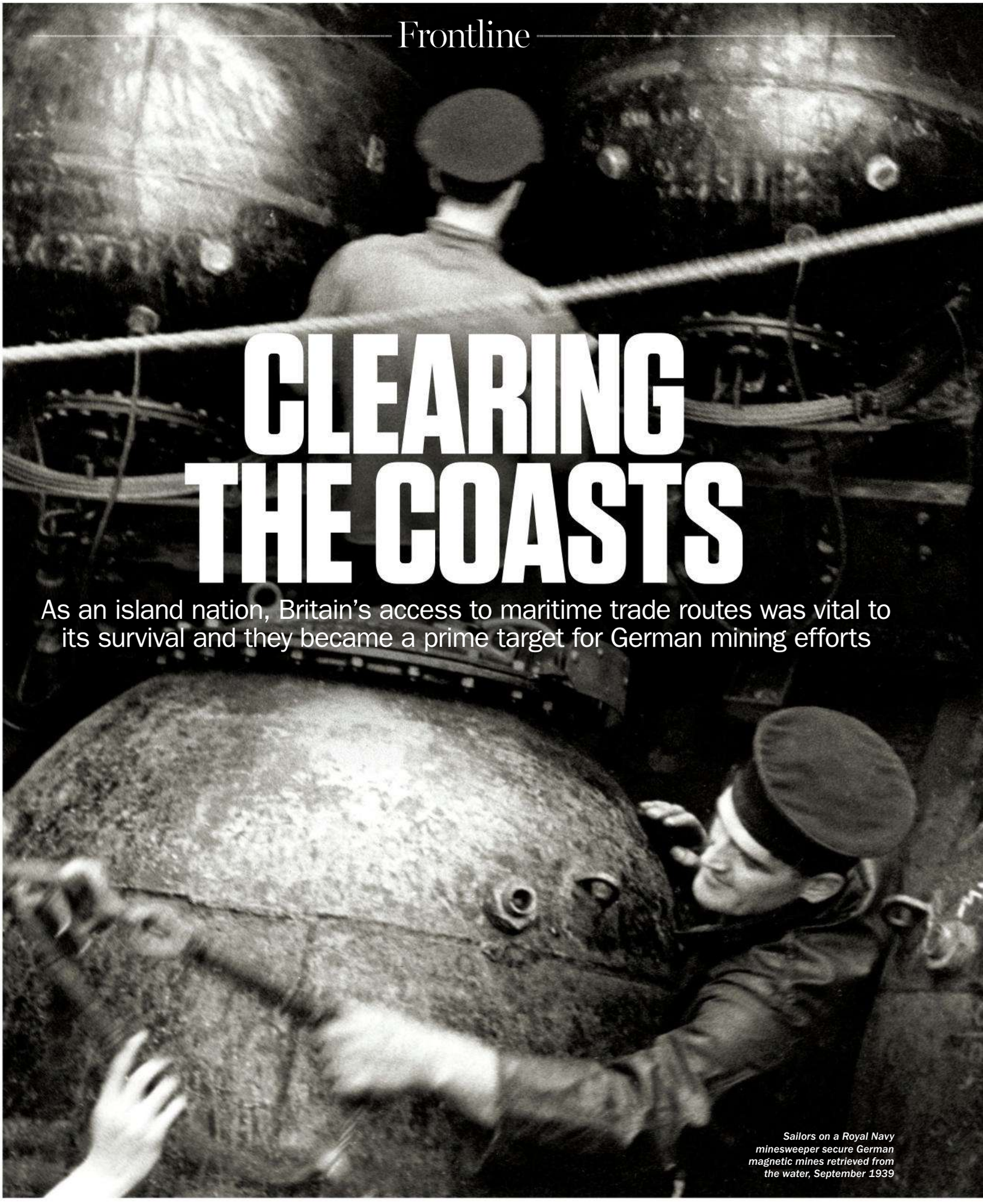


One of the First Minelaying Squadron's vessels was HMS Agamemnon, a former cargo ship that was later deployed to the Pacific as an amenities (recreation) ship

Images: Alamy, Getty

CLEARING THE COASTS

As an island nation, Britain's access to maritime trade routes was vital to its survival and they became a prime target for German mining efforts



Sailors on a Royal Navy minesweeper secure German magnetic mines retrieved from the water, September 1939

During the Second World War, particularly the early years, there were several threats to Britain's vital mercantile traffic: enemy aircraft, ships and submarines. And in the coastal waters surrounding the country lurked another danger – mines.

During the First World War, Germany had deployed 25,000 mines in British waters, sinking 259 merchant vessels. To counter this threat the Royal Navy (RN) eventually amassed a force of 726 minesweepers in home waters. Yet on 3 September 1939, despite the last-minute requisitioning of trawlers for conversion to minesweeping duties and the re-emergence of First World War-era minesweepers from Reserve, the RN's active minesweeping force comprised just 29 Fleet minesweepers and 25 minesweeping trawlers.

The first losses to mines in British coastal waters occurred on 10 September when the SS Magdepur and SS Goodwood were sunk in the vital East Coast War Channel. Other losses soon followed, but all these early sinkings were in waters that had been swept and re-swept. As losses and concerns soared, it was clear something was going wrong. The answer lay in Germany's advanced development of the magnetic mine during the inter-war years.

The magnetic mine was not a German invention; it had first been developed – and deployed – by Britain in 1918. However Germany had taken the technology forward in the 1930s whereas RN interest had lapsed, so while RN sweepers were well-practised in sweeping for 'conventional' moored, contact mines with which they were already familiar, they had no effective means of countering magnetic mines, which were taking a heavy toll on shipping around the coast.

Initial sweeping efforts included the 'Bosun's Nightmare' – a complex array of magnetic bars towed behind a sweeper. There were also Mine Destructor Ships, which were cargo vessels fitted with a large electro-magnetic coil that created a massive magnetic signature on the seabed where the mines lay. The Bosun's Nightmare was swiftly discarded as it was ineffective and impossible to deploy easily, while Mine Destructor Ships could easily be rendered ineffective by changes to the mines' settings (although the Kriegsmarine used similar technology in its own Sperrbrecher sweepers throughout the war). Converted Wellington bombers – fitted with a distinctive circular electro-magnetic coil that was also copied by Germany – provided some capability, but they were incapable of the navigational accuracy needed along the shipping lanes and would find their most useful employment over the Suez Canal.

What was needed was simple and effective technology that could be easily deployed, but this couldn't be developed until the RN knew more about the magnetic mines themselves. Salvation arrived on 23 November 1939 when Lieutenant Commander John Ouvry and his team from HMS Vernon rendered safe a mine that had been inadvertently dropped by a German aircraft onto the mudflats off Shoeburyness in Essex. Subsequent investigation enabled the swift introduction of the 'LL' sweep: two buoyant cables towed astern of a sweeper through which an electric current could be pulsed. This highly effective sweep could be fitted to most sweepers and was used throughout the war.

Mine technology wasn't static, though, and a deadly contest would run throughout the war as Germany developed new capabilities for its mines, which the RN sweepers then had to counter. Acoustic mines were first used in 1940, necessitating the development of the 'SA' sweep. This was initially a pneumatic jackhammer deployed in the flooded forepeak of a vessel, followed later by it being placed in a sealed drum suspended over the bows of a sweeper. The use of magnetic/acoustic combinations also proved a challenge, necessitating careful co-ordination of the formations of minesweepers sent out to keep the lanes and routes clear.

The number and types of sweepers also underwent drastic changes as the war progressed. New types of Fleet sweepers such as the Bangor and Algerine classes were designed and commissioned. In addition to the hundreds of drifters and trawlers being used as auxiliary sweepers (vessels which included Norwegian, French, Belgian and Dutch survivors from occupied Europe) new, purpose-built auxiliaries were entering service in large numbers. These types were ideal for inshore mine clearance along Britain's coastal routes and included wooden Motor Minesweepers and British Yard Minesweepers – designed and built in the USA. By the war's conclusion 1,115 minesweepers of all types were in service under the White Ensign.

Three hundred and thirty merchant vessels were sunk in Britain's coastal waters during the Second World War, together with a host of minesweepers. Although the west coast, south coast and the waters around Scotland received their share of mines, by far the biggest challenge, and the highest number of sinkings, was off the east coast and in the Thames Estuary – at one stage in 1940 the Port of London was almost rendered inaccessible. But thanks to technical and tactical innovation, a huge rise in the number of sweepers and the courage of the men who manned these small vessels, the threat never reached this level again.

Later in the war, in the Sea of Japan, a devastating American mining campaign in 1945 confirmed the impact of unchecked mine-laying. Without the constant endeavour of Allied sweeper crews, Britain's coastal waters would have been a similar death trap for the merchant vessels upon which the country depended.

"THREE HUNDRED AND THIRTY MERCHANT VESSELS WERE SUNK IN BRITAIN'S COASTAL WATERS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR, TOGETHER WITH A HOST OF MINESWEEPERS"

The Vickers Wellington DWI (Directional Wireless Installation) variant had a metal hoop that generated a magnetic field to detonate magnetic mines as the aircraft flew low overhead

Images: Alamy / Getty

SWEEPING TO VICTORY

Amphibious invasions were tricky operations, and danger lurked for the Allied forces before they could even reach the shore

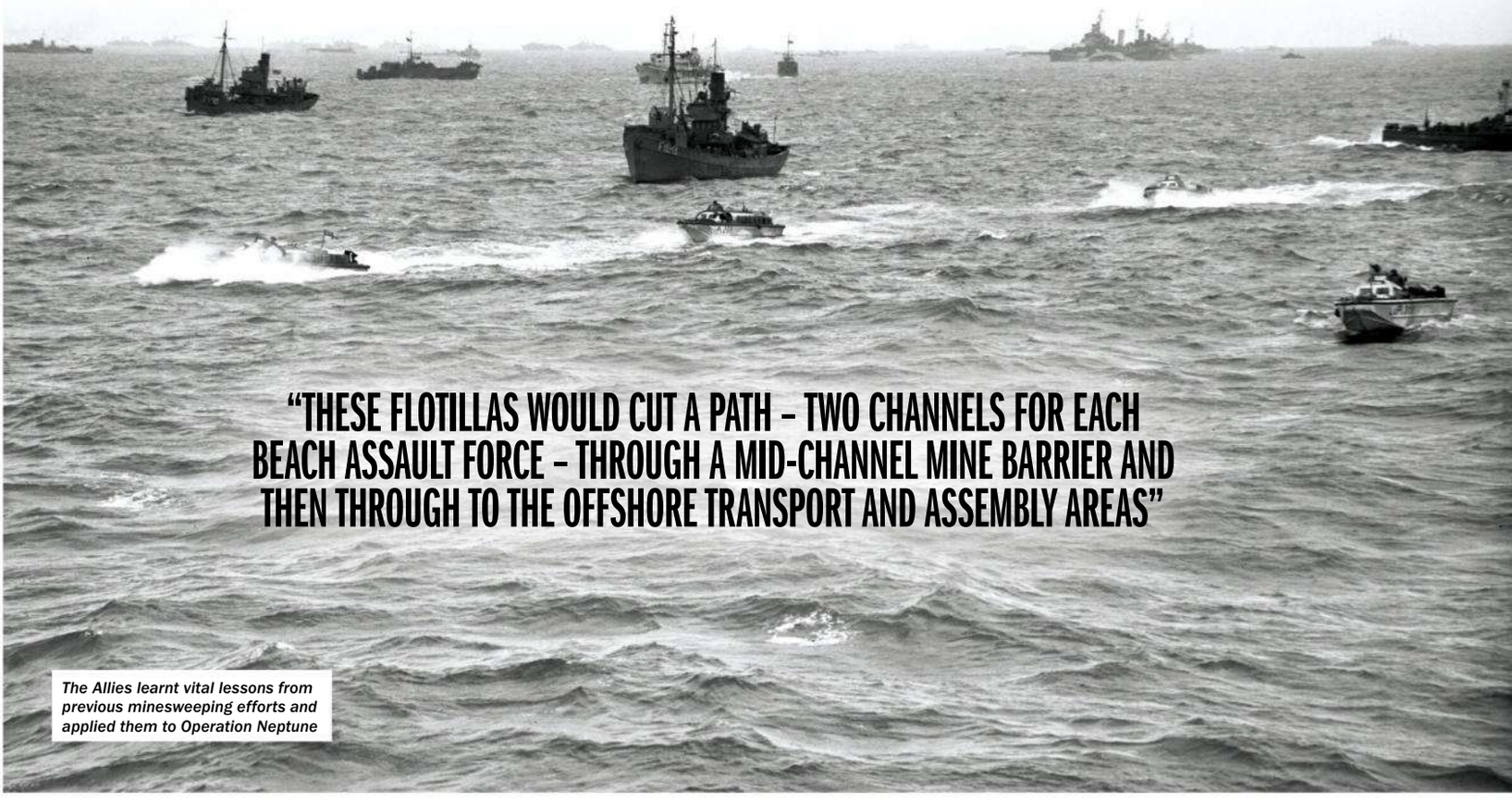
Victory against Germany hinged on the ability to liberate the European continent. Unlike Russia on the Eastern Front, the Western Allies were faced with the challenge of a hostile shore; Germany could not be defeated until Allied armies were back on the mainland. This would entail massive amphibious assaults and – given the enormous threat posed by the sea mine – a huge minesweeping effort.

Operations Neptune and Overlord in June 1944 would be the biggest test of the minesweepers' ability to ensure an invasion force could go ashore without having been decimated by the mine threat. But before an undertaking of this scale could even be considered, the sweepers would need to develop the doctrine, tactics and technologies vital for such a complex operation. That process began in May 1942 with Operation Ironclad and the capture of Diego Suarez.

Ironclad was launched to pre-empt the possibility of Japan seizing the massive natural harbour of Diego Suarez in Madagascar from Vichy France and using the base to interdict vital supply lines to India and – via the Red Sea route – the Mediterranean. It was the first significant amphibious assault of the war and, inevitably, minesweepers were to the fore; a mixed flotilla cleared the way for the successful seizure of the beaches to the west of the harbour and, later, ensured safe passage into the harbour itself.

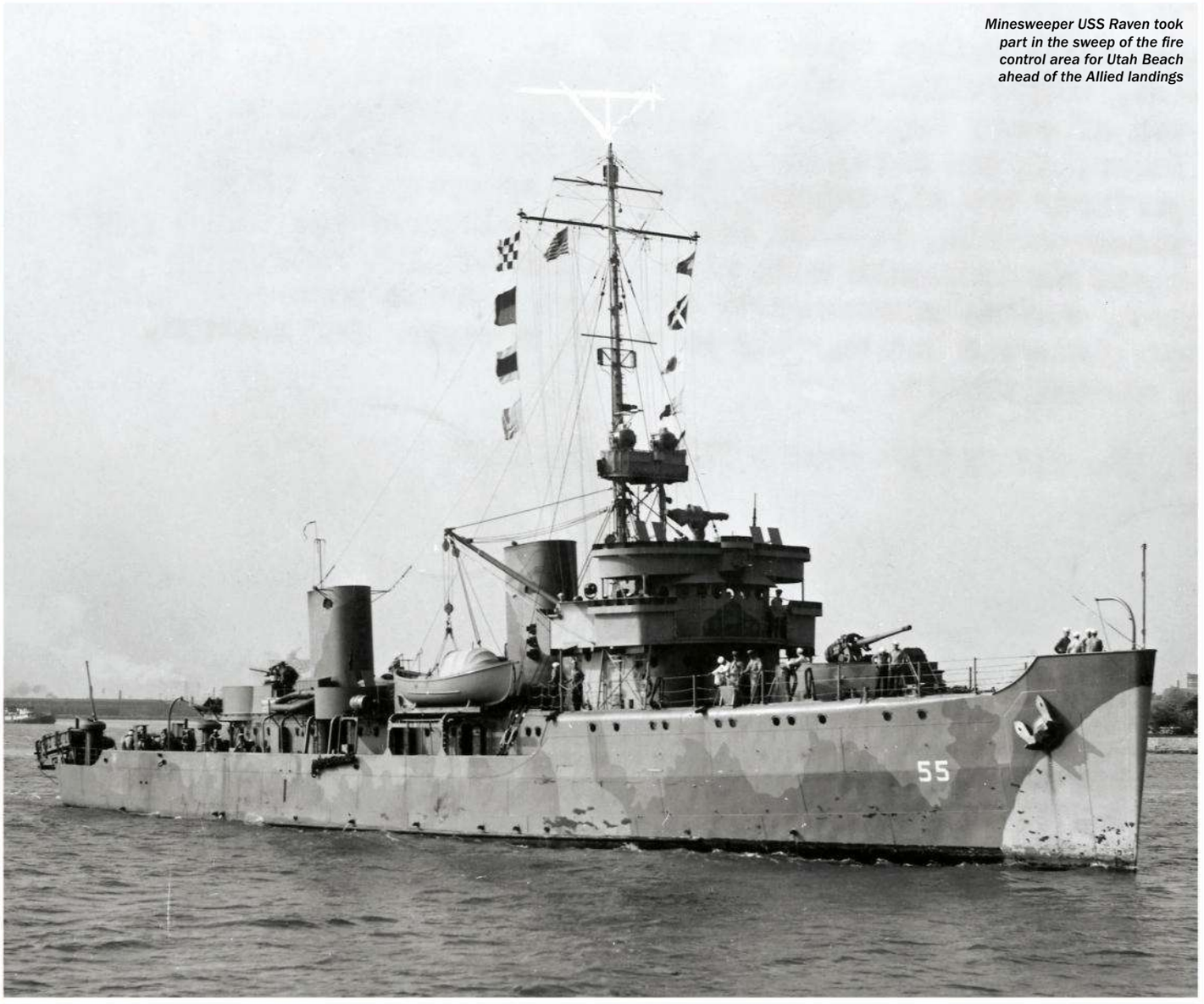
Lessons from Ironclad – in which one sweeper was lost to a mine – would prove of immense value during later operations of this nature. These lessons included the importance of accurate navigation and marking swept channels with dan buoys, the necessity for the sweeping force to be fully worked-up, the high attrition rate of sweep gear, and the need for careful co-ordination within the overall assault plan.

Two flotillas of minesweepers led the way during the Dieppe Raid in August 1942 and even more were committed to Operation Torch (North Africa) in November, working ahead of the assault forces bound for the British and American beaches. It was here that US Navy minesweepers had their introduction to the Atlantic/Mediterranean theatre of operations



"THESE FLOTILLAS WOULD CUT A PATH – TWO CHANNELS FOR EACH BEACH ASSAULT FORCE – THROUGH A MID-CHANNEL MINE BARRIER AND THEN THROUGH TO THE OFFSHORE TRANSPORT AND ASSEMBLY AREAS"

The Allies learnt vital lessons from previous minesweeping efforts and applied them to Operation Neptune



Minesweeper USS Raven took part in the sweep of the fire control area for Utah Beach ahead of the Allied landings

and these vessels would work increasingly closely with British sweepers during subsequent assault landings at Sicily (Operation Husky), Taranto (Operation Avalanche) and Anzio (Operation Shingle).

Vital lessons were being learned throughout this period, and these were factored into the planning and execution of the war's largest, most important and most complex amphibious operation: Neptune – the invasion of Northern France in June 1944.

Reflecting Admiral Bertram Ramsay's view that the mine posed the most significant threat to the maritime element of the invasion, around 300 minesweepers were involved in the landings. Leading the way were ten flotillas of larger Fleet sweepers of the Halcyon, Bangor, Algerine and venerable Hunt classes. Nine of these flotillas were from the Royal Navy and one was from the Royal Canadian Navy – a late addition to the order of battle due to the decision to expand the size of the initial bridgehead from three to five beaches.

These flotillas would cut a path – two channels for each beach assault force – through a mid-Channel mine barrier and then through to the offshore transport and assembly areas from which the various assault craft would be deployed. Reflecting lessons learned in the Mediterranean, each flotilla would be preceded by a couple of motor launches operating shallow sweep gear to counter mines laid specifically to target the sweepers. Immediately following the flotillas would be dan-layers to mark the swept channels.

Sweeper losses were expected to be heavy in this night-time effort and instructions to commanding officers were uncompromising: even if under heavy attack they were to continue the operation at all cost, and should avoid sinking in the swept channel. However, the skill of the crews and unexpected weaknesses in the German mine barrier meant that only one sweeper was lost in this initial stage of the operation, which saw 78 mines being swept.

Following the initial sweeper force came another host of minesweepers – British, American and Canadian – that had the task of clearing the inshore waters to be used as boat lanes for landing craft or firing areas for the battleships, cruisers and destroyers that would provide support to the troops on the ground. These missions, and the steady widening of all swept channels, were accomplished without loss to the invasion force from mines on D-Day other than severe damage to a British destroyer off Juno Beach. The coming days and weeks would prove even more taxing, though, with the Luftwaffe launching a massive aerial mining campaign over the assault area using new 'pressure' mines which caused significant losses and new challenges for the hard-pressed sweepers.

Normandy represented something of a high-water mark for assault sweeping in the Second World War. A similar operation would take place off the beaches of Southern France in August 1944, and the planned seizure of Rangoon in 1945 would have involved a significant minesweeping effort had it taken place. In the Pacific, the capture of Okinawa also witnessed important minesweeper involvement, albeit not on the scale of Neptune and Overlord. What is clear, though, is that without the success of the minesweeper forces in clearing the path for invasion forces, the Allies' ultimate victory would have been a lengthier process, involving a far greater loss of life.

Images: Alamy, Wiki / PD / Gov

DANGER IN THE DEPTHS

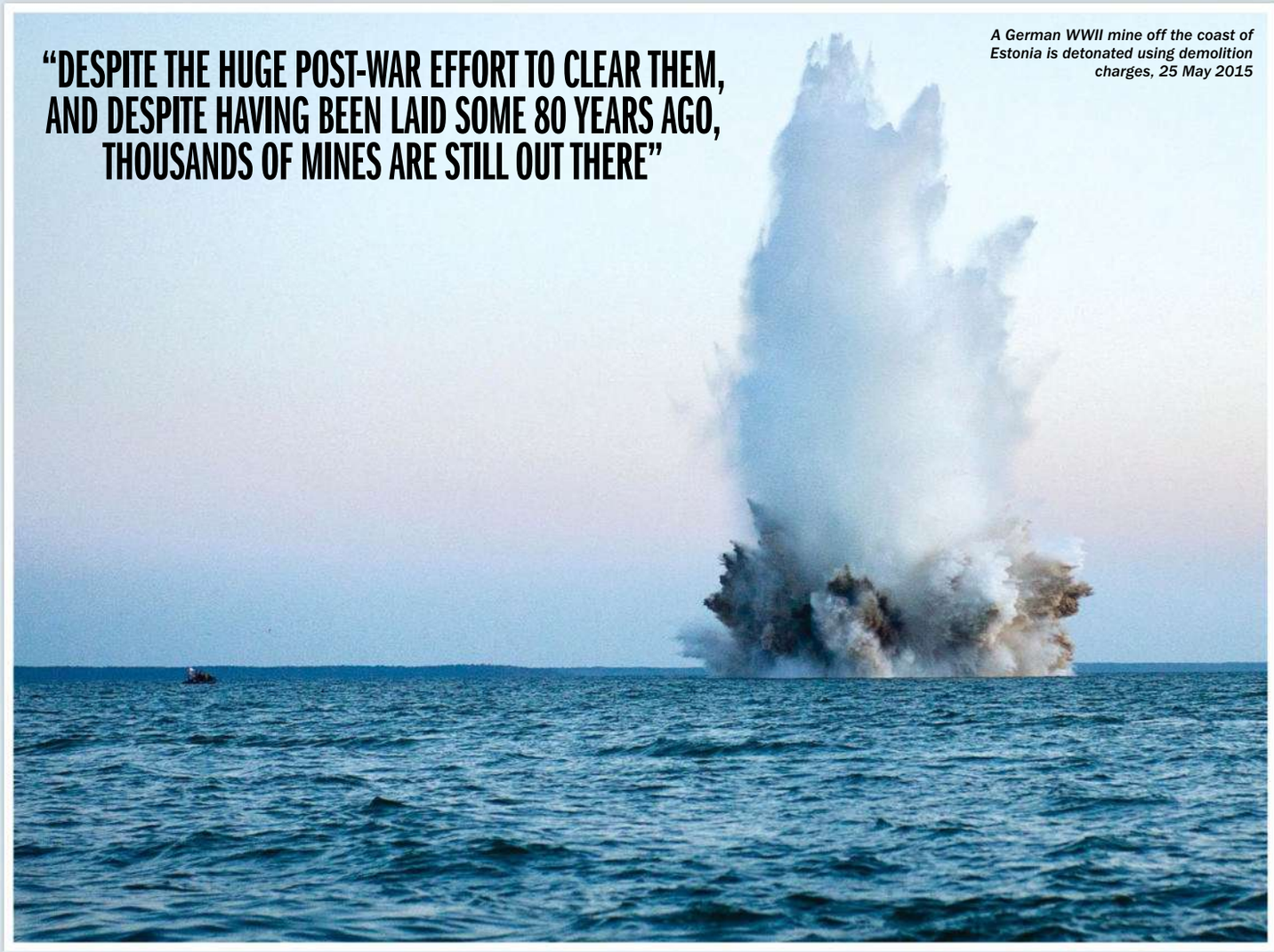
After WWII, thousands of high-explosives remained hidden beneath the waves, leading to a huge clean up operation that's still ongoing nearly 80 years later

The end of hostilities in 1945 was not accompanied by a sudden disappearance of the threat posed by the sea mine. It is estimated that around 300,000 of these deadly devices continued to lurk in the depths at the war's conclusion. Oblivious to VE Day and VJ Day celebrations, they remained infesting the waters surrounding the UK, North Sea, Baltic, Mediterranean, Sea of Japan and elsewhere.

Consequently there was to be no respite for the Allies' minesweepers as a massive effort was needed to clear up the extensive minefields that threatened the resumption of peacetime maritime trade. Nor was the effort confined to the Allies: their former German and Italian adversaries were also soon back at sea – under close supervision – sweeping the tens of thousands of mines that lay off their coastlines. The German effort was controlled by the German Mine Sweeping Administration (GMSA), headed by a Royal Navy (RN) officer. It comprised nearly 27,000 sailors and 300 boats and operated until 1948, only ceasing due to Soviet concerns over it becoming a cadre for a future West German Navy.

Around Japan, some 60,000 mines were estimated to remain off ports, coastlines and in key shipping lanes. To counter these, the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN)

A bomb disposal officer pulls a mine from the sea near Hythe on England's south-east coast, 24 December 1945



A German WWII mine off the coast of Estonia is detonated using demolition charges, 25 May 2015

"DESPITE THE HUGE POST-WAR EFFORT TO CLEAR THEM, AND DESPITE HAVING BEEN LAID SOME 80 YEARS AGO, THOUSANDS OF MINES ARE STILL OUT THERE"

was directed – in Occupation General Order Number 1 – to ensure all mines, minefields and obstructions were cleared. To achieve this, a Minesweeping Bureau was formed to oversee a force of 10,000 IJN sailors and 385 minesweeping vessels.

That the mine continued to pose a significant threat to seafarers was confirmed by a steady flow of peacetime losses in the war's aftermath. Even the minesweepers charged with clearing them up were not safe – the GMSA alone lost 10 sweepers and 53 crew members to mines during its short life. In Japanese waters no fewer than 90 vessels were lost to mines between VJ Day and 1953. Despite the huge post-war effort to clear them, and despite having been laid some 80 years ago, thousands of mines are still out there.

Sometimes this historic ordnance is located during mine warfare exercises, sometimes it appears in the nets of trawlers in coastal waters, and sometimes it appears during seabed dredging – such as the discovery of a German mine in the Solent during operations in 2015 to deepen a channel for the RN's new aircraft carriers. It can also announce its presence in a more spectacular and dangerous fashion. As early as 9 May 1945 the RN suffered its first loss to a 'peacetime' mine when HMS Prompt – a new Algerine class sweeper – hit a mine and was damaged beyond repair off Ostend. Fast-forward to April 2020 and trawler Grietje Cornelia picked up a Second World War ground mine in its nets off the Dutch coast. Later that year an encounter with another sea mine had an even more dangerous outcome when the crab potter Galwad-y-Mor detonated a mine off the UK's east coast, resulting in the vessel's loss.

The mine's potency has resulted in it remaining a valuable weapon during conflict. The RN remains at the forefront of mine countermeasures (MCM), having consolidated its experience during the two World Wars with live operations that have included the Red Sea, Falklands and Persian Gulf (twice). Neglect of this arm of warfare can have embarrassing and costly consequences. It was off Wonsan, Korea, in 1950 that – upon being foiled in attempts to launch an amphibious landing by the presence of ex-Soviet mines laid from junks and sampans – Rear Admiral Allen Smith announced: "The US Navy has lost control of the seas in Korean waters to a nation without a navy, using pre-World War I weapons, laid by vessels that were utilised at the time of the birth of Christ."

Techniques have evolved, though. Ship counts, arming delays, combination mines and, crucially, the pressure mine had all demonstrated the shortcomings of influence and mechanical (wire) sweeping in the Second World War. As a result, the RN led the development of using high-frequency sonar to detect mines on the seabed – 'minehunting' – and then deploying a diving team to detonate any mines that had been located and marked. Although never redundant, these diving teams have increasingly stepped aside to allow the hunters' remote-controlled submersibles to 'prosecute' the sonar target using cameras for a visual confirmation of the mine before laying an explosive charge next to it, or using the autonomous vehicle itself as the 'warshot'.

The slow pace of minehunting can now be accelerated by the use of higher definition sidescan sonars and these can be deployed from autonomous underwater vehicles at range from the 'mother ship', which can remain in safe waters. The RN is employing a similar philosophy for its Mine Hunting Capability programme, with trials currently taking place in the Persian Gulf for both hunting and sweeping mines.

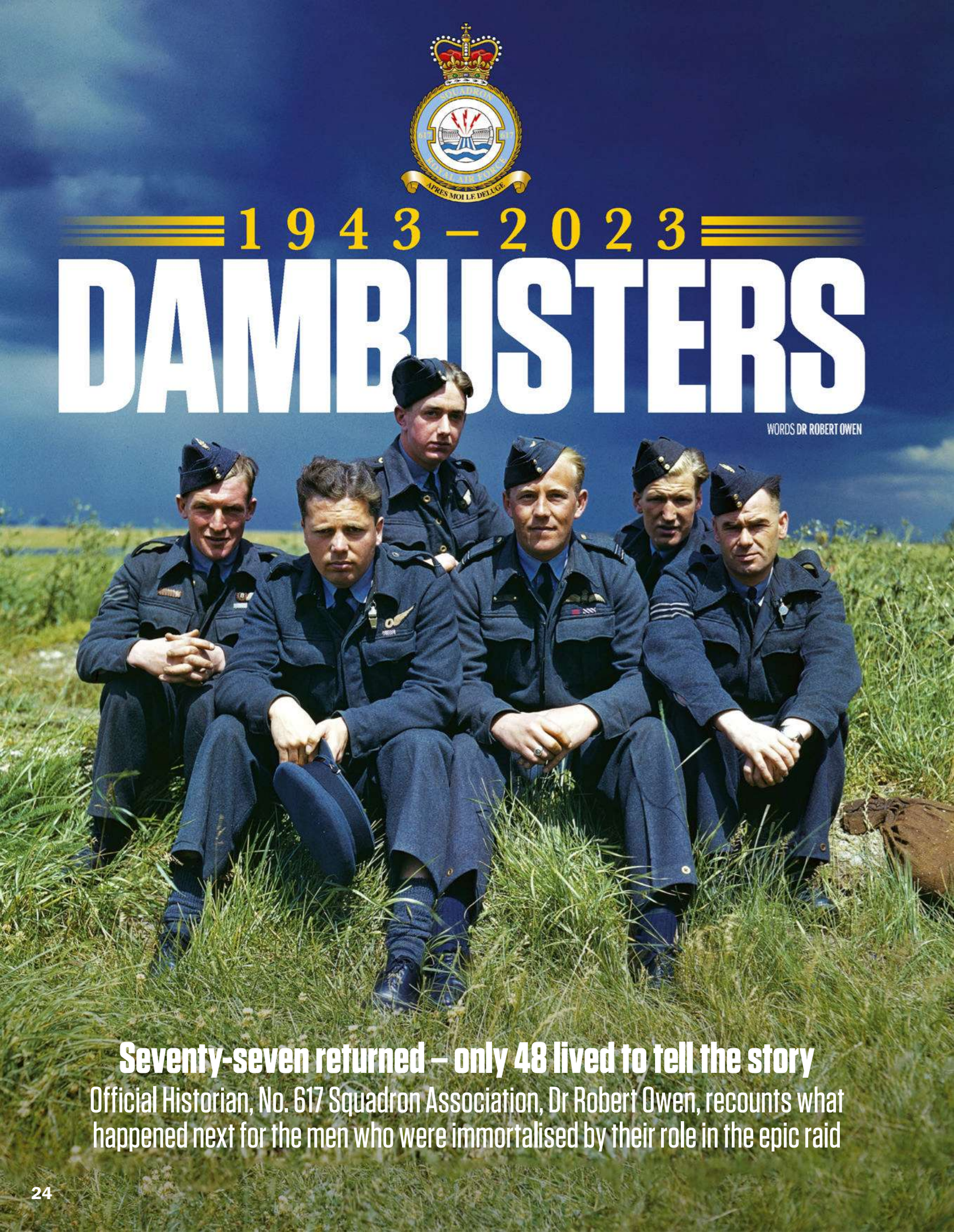
Recent events such as the sinking of Galwad-Y-Mor and the use of mines in the Black Sea confirm that mines continue to pose a threat during both peacetime and hostilities. Despite recent advances in technology and techniques, there is no reason to doubt that they will continue to pose a danger in the depths.

Images: Alamy, Getty

1943–2023

DAMBUSTERS

WORDS DR ROBERT OWEN



Seventy-seven returned – only 48 lived to tell the story

Official Historian, No. 617 Squadron Association, Dr Robert Owen, recounts what happened next for the men who were immortalised by their role in the epic raid

Of the 19 Lancasters that set out from RAF Scampton on Operation Chastise on the evening of 16 May 1943, only 11 returned. One hundred and thirty-three aircrew had trained for this epic mission, 53 had died and three would now spend the next two years as prisoners of war. However, for the remaining members of 617 Squadron, the war was far from over. Though basking in the glow of the audacious raid, more dangerous missions and special operations awaited 617's airmen.

The first to leave the squadron was Flight Sergeant Cyril Anderson. One of the least experienced to fly on Chastise, he had experienced technical problems and was then forced off track by searchlights. Uncertain of his position he had abandoned his mission and returned home with his Upkeep bomb still onboard. Following a short interview with Wing Commander Gibson, the crew were immediately posted back to 49 Squadron. There they continued to operate with the main force, but ill fortune seemed to sit on their shoulders. On the night of 23 September 1943, they were all killed when their Lancaster was shot down by a night fighter near Offenbach while returning from an operation to Mannheim.

Others were more fortunate. Pilot Officer Bill Townsend who had been part of the reserve wave and attacked the Ennepe (or possibly the Bever) Dam – identification is uncertain – left 617 Squadron at the beginning of October 1943, deemed tour expired. Posted to the Conversion Unit at RAF Balderton, he subsequently spent the remainder of the war instructing, before being sent to India to fly Liberators in February 1945.

***Left:** The crew of Lancaster ED285, left to right: G Johnson; D. A. MacLean; J. C. McCarthy, L Eaton. Back row: R Batson and W. G. Radcliffe*

***Below:** From left – Ernie Twells, Bill Townsend, Ivan Whittaker, George Chalmers, Bill Howarth and Jack Buckley at RAF Scampton, May 1977*

"A LIGHT FLAK GUN HIT THE LANCASTER IN A WING TANK. THE AIRCRAFT EXPLODED AS IT HIT THE GROUND"

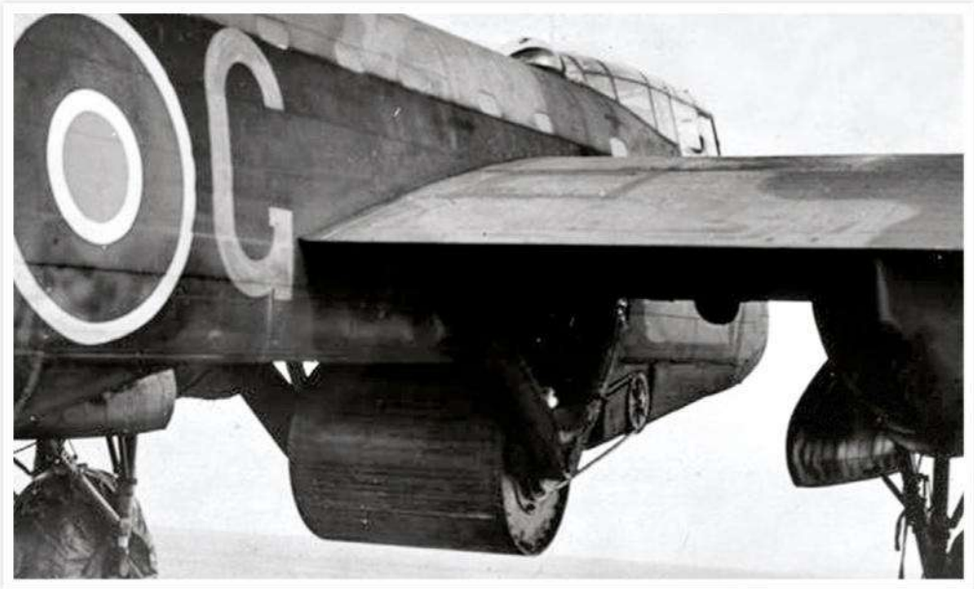
Gibson was taken off operations after the Dams Raid and in August was sent on a four-month public relations tour of North America. Meanwhile, Air Marshal Arthur Harris had taken the decision to retain 617 Squadron as a Special Duties unit. While they waited for new aircraft and weapons during the summer of 1943 the squadron flew four 'shuttle' operations against Italian targets, landing in North Africa to refuel and re-arm.

Return to Germany

By September 1943 the squadron had moved to RAF Coningsby and received the new 12,000lb [5,443kg] HC blast bomb. With this weapon they were tasked with breaching an embanked section of the Dortmund-Ems Canal, near Munster. Like the Dams Raid, the operation was to be a low-level, deep-penetration night attack. On 14 September, eight aircraft were despatched. Owing to adverse weather reports, they were recalled 20 miles [32km] off the Norfolk coast. As they turned at low level, the Lancaster flown by Flight Lieutenant David Maltby, who had made the final attack to breach the Mohne Dam, hit the sea. The cause of the accident is obscure, but all were killed, with only Maltby's body being recovered for burial.

The following night a further eight aircraft were despatched to the same target, led by the new squadron commander, Squadron Leader George Holden. Flying with him were five members of Gibson's crew, together with Flight Engineer Sergeant Powell who had been with Townsend's crew on Chastise. As they approached Nordhorn, a light flak gun hit the Lancaster in a wing tank. The aircraft exploded as it hit the ground – there were no survivors.

Images © Alamy, Getty, Wiki / PD / Gov



***Above:** British engineer Barnes Wallis began developing the 'bouncing bomb' in 1942, later producing the Upkeep and Highball devices*

***Above right:** Testing revealed the bomb needed to be dropped from a height of 60ft (18m) and at a ground speed of 232mph (373kph/h)*

As they reached the target area, Flight Lieutenant Harold Wilson and Pilot Officer William Divall also fell to light flak. Both crews, who had trained for the Dams Raid but not taken part owing to illness, were killed. Flight Lieutenant Les Knight and his crew, who had breached the Eder Dam, were flying low over mist-shrouded countryside, searching for the target, when their aircraft struck a tree-covered ridge. Two engines were knocked out and the Lancaster's tail unit damaged. Struggling to control the aircraft, Knight jettisoned his bomb and headed for home, but it was obvious that the aircraft was doomed. While Knight wrestled with the controls, the rest of the crew bailed out before he attempted a belly landing. The damaged Lancaster struck a bank crossing the field and exploded. Knight died instantly. Two of the crew were captured almost immediately as they landed, but remarkably five (they were carrying an additional gunner) made successful evasions back to the UK. Of the eight aircraft despatched that night, five had failed to return.

France and Belgium

The losses on the Dortmund-Ems Canal mission had proven that low-level operations were unsustainable. As the squadron received new crews, their role changed. Instead of concentrating on low-level attacks they were given a new precision bombsight and switched to high-level precision bombing. Their targets were changed to the newly emerging V-weapon 'Ski' sites and factories in occupied Belgium and France.

On the night of 20 December 1943, Flight Lieutenant Geoff Rice, who had been forced to abandon Operation Chastise after hitting the water of the Zuiderzee and losing his bomb, was one of eight aircraft detailed to attack the Cockerill Steelworks at Liege. Unable to bomb because of cloud over the target, Rice had turned for home when his Lancaster was attacked by a nightfighter and set alight. Before the crew could abandon their aircraft, it exploded. Miraculously Rice survived, his navigator having just given him his parachute, but the rest of his crew perished. Rice established contact with the Resistance and evaded capture until April 1944. He was betrayed by a German informant in Antwerp and spent the rest of the war as a prisoner.

"THE DAMAGED LANCASTER STRUCK A BANK CROSSING THE FIELD AND EXPLODED. KNIGHT DIED INSTANTLY"

The squadron continued to attack the V-1 launch sites and French factories into the new year. Wing Commander Cheshire's pioneering of a low-level marking technique, inspired by Mick Martin's philosophy, resulted in incredibly accurate results with minimal casualties. Even so, the attrition of the ranks of those who had flown on Chastise continued.

On 12 February 1944, ten aircraft were sent to the Antheor Viaduct on the French Riviera. It was heavily defended, and while Squadron Leader Martin was attempting to mark the target from very low level his aircraft was struck by a 20mm cannon shell. It entered the nose, killing bomb aimer Flight Lieutenant Bob Hay and damaging the engine controls. Unable to return to England, Martin diverted to Sardinia, where Hay was buried at Ajaccio. After rudimentary repairs, the Lancaster was flown to North Africa, before returning to the UK.

Meanwhile, the remainder of the squadron returned direct from the target to an advanced base, Ford in Sussex, to rest and refuel. The next morning they departed for their base at Woodhall Spa. Shortly after takeoff Squadron Leader Bill Suggitt's aircraft hit the crest of a cloud-shrouded hill north-east of Chichester. All on board were killed, among them Sergeant John Pulford, Gibson's flight engineer on Chastise. His switch from Holden's crew the previous September had given him but five extra short months of life.

When they had started operations, Martin's crew had made a pact: they would all finish their tour together. They had narrowly escaped death on the Dams Raid when a fuel tank had been hit; now, after Hay's death, and the fact that they had already extended their tour (Martin was on his 49th operation), they decided to cease operations and leave the squadron.

The next two months saw the deaths of two more participants of Chastise, who had since been posted from the squadron. Flight Lieutenant Richard Trevor-Roper, Gibson's rear gunner, left 617 at the end of August 1943, posted to the Central Gunnery School. He joined the Pathfinders in February 1944, going to 97 Squadron a fortnight later. On 31 March he was flying in the crew of Flight Lieutenant Rowlands on the ill-fated Nuremberg raid. Rowlands' was one of the 95 crews that failed to return, all aboard the Lancaster being killed when it fell to the guns of nightfighter ace Major Martin Drewes.

Above: *The bomb was designed to spin backwards and bounce across the surface of the water before reaching its target*

Right: *Wing Commander Guy Gibson pictured in May 1943*

Above: *Aerial photo taken of the Möhne Dam in the aftermath of Chastise*

Images © Alamy, Getty, Wiki / PD / Gov

Sergeant Brian Jagger, Flight Lieutenant David Shannon's rear gunner for Chastise, was posted from the squadron in March 1944. On 30 April, attached to the Bombing Development Unit, he was flying in a 460 Squadron Lancaster on a fighter affiliation exercise when the aircraft's dinghy came out of its storage and wrapped around the aircraft's tail, with the loss of all on board.

Flight Lieutenant Ken Brown and his crew, in the reserve wave who'd made the second attack on the Sorpe Dam, were declared tour expired at the end of March and he was sent to No 5 Lancaster Finishing School as an instructor. This left only three remaining Chastise crews – McCarthy, Munro and Shannon – in the squadron. Along with Martin, they had become the backbone of the squadron and with the former's departure were very much seen as the senior cadre.

Operation Taxable and last of the 'Originals'

Leonard Cheshire continued to develop the low-level marking technique. Diving a Lancaster to within 50ft (15m) of the roof of an undefended French factory was one thing, but a smaller and faster machine was needed for a defended target. In April 1944 he was able to obtain Mosquitoes. Shannon became one of the low-level

"EQUIPPED WITH BARNES WALLIS' 12,000LB DEEP PENETRATION BOMB 'TALLBOY' THEY SHATTERED E-BOAT PENS AND LARGE V-WEAPON SITES"

Mosquito markers. While his Lancaster crew were posted as tour expired, his bomb aimer Len Sumpter opted to remuster as navigator to remain with him.

During May they practised for the squadron's contribution to D-Day, Operation Taxable, creating a spoof invasion convoy using 'window' – strips of metal foil – to confuse the Germans, then reverted to precision bombing. Equipped with Barnes Wallis' 12,000lb (5,443kg) deep-penetration bomb Tallboy they shattered E-boat pens and large V-weapon sites. The squadron would continue to strike at such 'hardened' targets over the summer, but by July, with the cessation of Cheshire's time in command, McCarthy, Munro and Shannon too were deemed tour expired and taken off operations.

Members of 617 squadron toast Wing Commander Guy Gibson and Mrs Gibson after his investiture of the Victoria Cross

That might have been the last 617 Squadron saw of the 'Originals' were it not for Bill Townsend's two gunners, Ray Wilkinson and Doug Webb, who returned to the squadron in October 1944. In January 1945 they were joined by the redoubtable Len Sumpter. The trio operated until the end of the war. Attacking Hitler's Bavarian redoubt at Berchtesgaden on 25 April 1945, they were unique in participating in the squadron's first and final missions.

Meanwhile confirmation had been received of the death of Gibson, who had failed to return from a self-appointed role as master bomber for a Main Force attack on Munchen Gladbach/Rheydt on 19 September 1944. After directing the operation, his Mosquito crashed in Holland on the return flight, killing Gibson and his navigator. The reason for his loss remains debated to this day.

There was one further loss of an 'Original'. Percy Heal, navigator with Ken Brown, had left the squadron in March 1944, along with the rest of the crew. After a period as an instructor at an operational training unit, he converted to the B-17 Flying Fortress and returned to operations in February 1945, with 214 Squadron. On his eighth operation with them, his aircraft experienced engine problems and was hit by flak. The crew bailed out, Heal was captured and correctly treated by the authorities. Regrettably, some of his crewmates were less fortunate, being executed by members of the Hitler Youth.

Dambusters post-war

By the war's end, 48 of Operation Chastise's participants had survived. Most returned to civilian life: David Shannon ran a flower shop, and then a small holding before becoming a successful executive in the oil industry, as did Geoff Rice. Les Munro returned to farm in New Zealand and became engaged in local government and justice.

Other members of 617 remained in their respective air forces. After leaving the squadron in July 1944, the American Joe McCarthy was posted to the Royal Aircraft Establishment, Farnborough, where he qualified as a test pilot and went on to evaluate captured enemy aircraft. McCarthy returned to Canada in 1946, adopting Canadian citizenship in order to remain in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). In Canada he served with the RCAF Test and Development Unit, where he undertook Arctic trials, before a period of instruction and then flying maritime and reconnaissance duties. He retired in 1968 and returned to the USA.

Images © Alamy, Getty, Wiki / PD / Gov

King George VI inspects members of No. 57 Sqn at RAF Scampton, May 1943

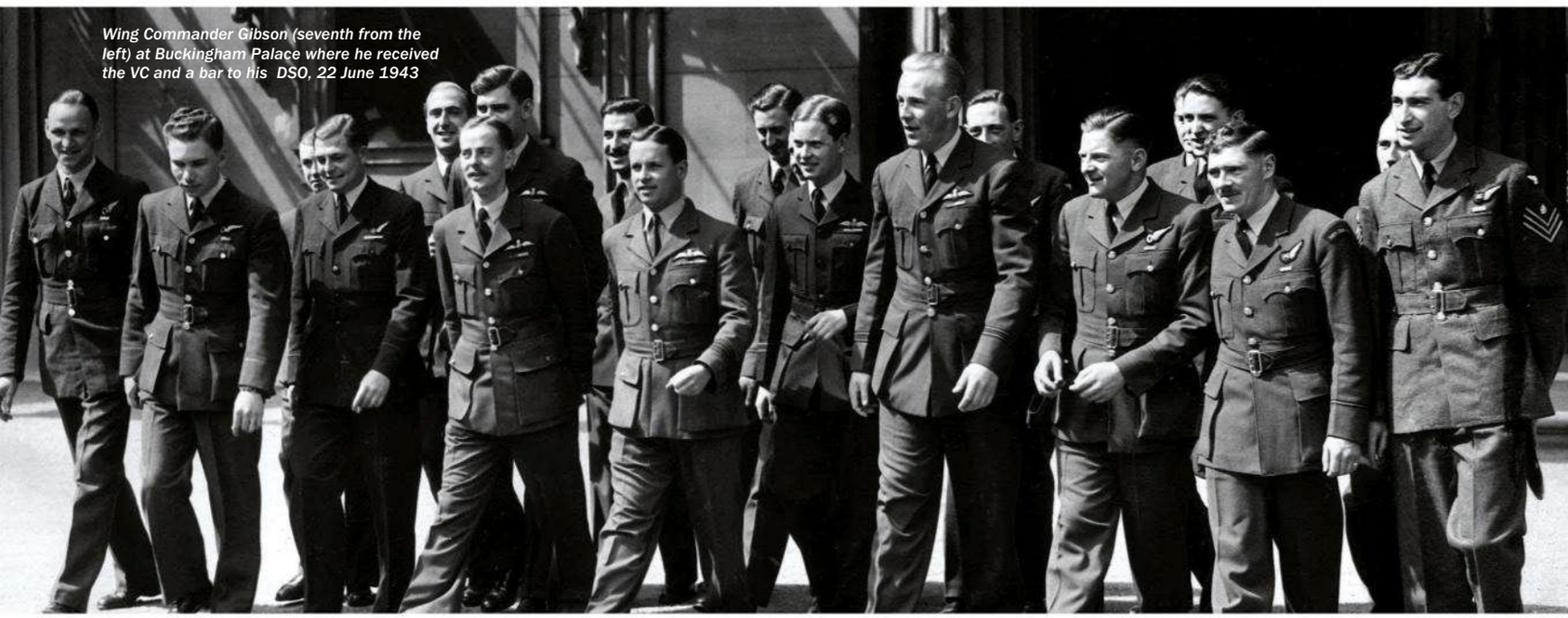
From left – George Chalmers, Ivan Whittaker, Jack Buckley, Bill Howarth and Bill Townsend in the cockpit of last operational Lancaster

Likewise, Canadian Ken Brown remained in the RCAF until 1968, then continued flying in a civil capacity. John Vere Hopgood's rear gunner, Tony Burcher, recovered from the injuries received when his aircraft exploded and continued to serve in the Royal Australian Air Force, returning to flying duties in Short Sunderlands in the Far East. His fellow survivor from M-Mother, Flight Sergeant John Fraser, returned to Canada after his release from prison camp. He took with him his bride, whom he'd married less than three weeks before he failed to return from the Dams Raid. Settling in Vancouver, he worked for the forestry service and also obtained a private pilot's licence. Having survived what he described as "the shortest parachute jump in history" it was a cruel twist of fate when, in June 1962, he was killed in a flying accident.

In his book *The Dam Busters*, historian Paul Brickhill notes Air Officer Commanding No 5 Group, Air Vice

"IT WAS A TRAGIC END FOR ONE WHO HAD CONTINUALLY FACED DOWN DANGER WHILE CREATING THE SQUADRON'S HISTORY"

Marshal Sir Ralph Cochrane, considered Harold Martin the "greatest pilot the RAF produced during the war". Martin, who had joined the RAF in 1940 and was a key protagonist of the squadron's low-flying and marking, went on to have an illustrious post-war career. After leaving 617 he transferred to 515 Mosquito Squadron, flying intruder missions over the Continent. After an immediate post-war spell with Transport Command, he flew a Mosquito to shepherd a squadron of Vampires across the Atlantic,

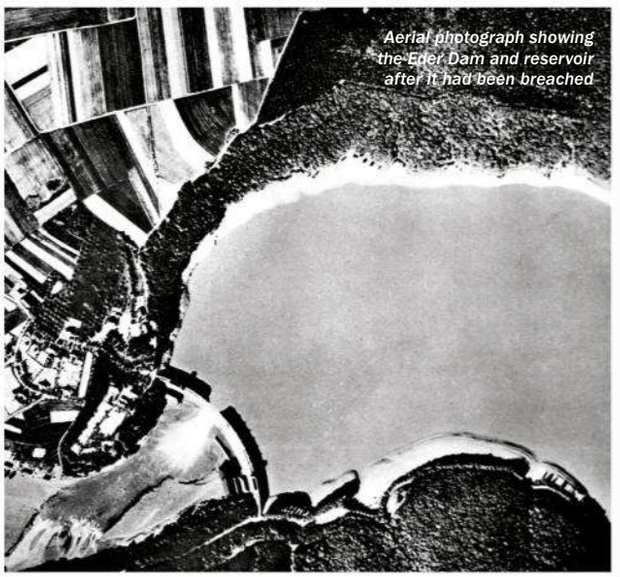


Wing Commander Gibson (seventh from the left) at Buckingham Palace where he received the VC and a bar to his DSO, 22 June 1943

TRIBUTE TO THE LAST DAMBUSTER

ANDY SAUNDERS LOOKS BACK ON THE INCREDIBLE LIFE OF GEORGE 'JOHNNY' JOHNSON **PAGE 70**

Dave Shannon, R. D. Trevor-Roper and G. W. Holden pictured July 1943



Aerial photograph showing the Eder Dam and reservoir after it had been breached

and established a record flight time from the UK to Capetown. Posted at various times to the Middle East and Mediterranean, with attachments to NATO and Command of Transport Command, he was twice appointed aide de camp to the Queen, before becoming commander in chief, RAF Germany. There he was in effect responsible for the defence of the Möhne Dam. As Air Marshal Sir Harold Martin, he retired in 1974. He died in 1987 from complications caused by a road traffic accident – a tragic end for one who had continually faced down danger while creating the squadron's history.

It was at Mick Martin's instigation that former 617 Squadron members met in October 1951 for their first post-war gathering, coinciding with the publication of Brickhill's stirring account of their wartime exploits.

A further gathering took place in May 1955, with the premier of Michael Anderson's epic film. Twelve years later, in May 1967, a group of the 'Originals' including Geoff Rice, Bill Townsend and Douglas Webb made a nostalgic flight from Biggin Hill back to their former base at Scampton in Lancaster NX611 (now preserved as Just Jane at East Kirkby). It was not the final flight in a Lancaster for a Dams Raid veteran. That honour fell to George 'Johnny' Johnson who, aged 96, was flown over Derwent Valley in the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight Lancaster.

On landing, he commented: "It's surprising how 75 years just disappear. Over the Derwent Dam, the time was gone – just like that, I was back there… thinking about the times that we went there. I have to say the first time I noticed the hilly area we were going to, I wondered what the hell we were doing down at 60ft [18m], but there it was, that was the job."

Above: *Guy Gibson pictured during King George VI's visit to RAF Scampton, on 27 May 1943*

Below: *Sir Arthur Harris with veterans of the Dambusters raid*

TOTAL AIRCRAFT ON OPERATION CHASTISE: 19. 11 RETURNED

133 — CREW ON OPERATION CHASTISE
53 — CREW LOST ON OPERATION CHASTISE
3 — CREW TAKEN PRISONER DURING OPERATION CHASTISE
77 — CREW RETURNED FROM OPERATION CHASTISE
48 — CREW TO SURVIVE THE WAR

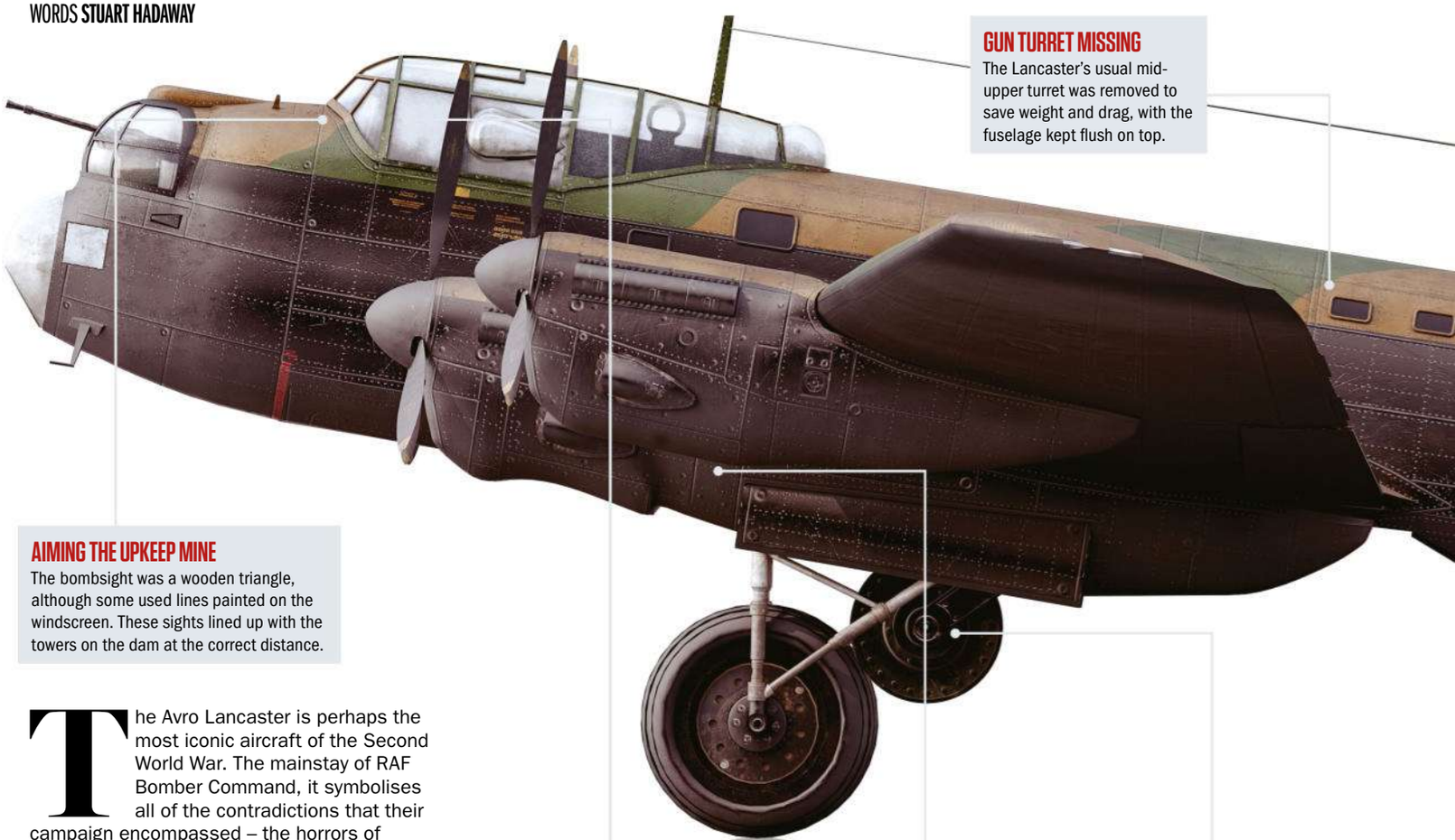
Members of 617 Sqaudron at a celebratory dinner, London, 22 June 1943

Images © Alamy, Getty, Wiki / PD /

B III SPECIAL AVRO LANCASTER

Inside the modified aircraft that 'busted' the German dams in May 1943

WORDS **STUART HADAWAY**



GUN TURRET MISSING
The Lancaster's usual mid-upper turret was removed to save weight and drag, with the fuselage kept flush on top.

AIMING THE UPKEEP MINE
The bombsight was a wooden triangle, although some used lines painted on the windscreen. These sights lined up with the towers on the dam at the correct distance.

The Avro Lancaster is perhaps the most iconic aircraft of the Second World War. The mainstay of RAF Bomber Command, it symbolises all of the contradictions that their campaign encompassed – the horrors of war and terrible decisions needed, sacrifice, perseverance through great adversity, courage, and dedication to duty.

Avro's chief designer, Roy Chadwick, had designed the twin-engined Avro Manchester to a 1936 specification for an aircraft also capable of being a torpedo bomber; while never used as such, the legacy of this brief was the Lancaster's long, unimpeded bomb bay and tremendous structural strength. When the Manchester proved underpowered, two more engines were added and in 1942 the Lancaster entered squadron service. Some 7,377 would be made, and by early 1945 over a thousand were on strength with Bomber Command.

ABSOLUTE CONCENTRATION
The pilot would need to keep the aircraft absolutely level at 60ft (18.3m) and 220mph (354km/h) for the mine to drop successfully, all while under enemy fire.

LIGHTING THE WAY
Two searchlights were fitted pointing downwards under the fuselage, calibrated to make a figure-of-eight pattern when the aircraft was at the correct height above the water.

UPKEEP MECHANISM
The Upkeep mine hung low on brackets, connected by drive bands to a motor ahead of it. This would rotate it at the 500 revolutions per minute needed for it to bounce.

AVRO LANCASTER BIII SPECIAL

PRODUCTION	1943
ORIGIN	BRITISH
LENGTH	69FT 4IN (21.13M)
WINGSPAN	102FT (31.09M)
ENGINE	4 X ROLLS-ROYCE MERLIN MK 28 PISTON ENGINES
CREW	7
PRIMARY WEAPON	1 X 9,250LB (4,200KG) UPKEEP MINE
SECONDARY WEAPON	6 X 0.303IN (7.7MM) BROWNING MACHINE GUNS

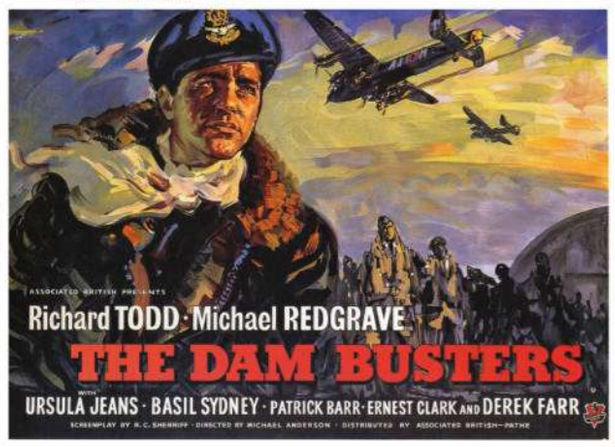
Illustration: Nicholas Forder

***Left:** Wing Commander Guy Gibson, leader of the Dambusters, signs a photograph of a breached dam*

***Below:** The Lancaster BIII Special would be immortalised in the 1955 film The Dam Busters, even if many technical details were changed for security and narrative reasons*

When an aircraft was needed for a special operation in the spring of 1943 the Lancaster was the obvious choice. With its great structural strength and massive bomb bay, the Lancaster would be able to take the necessary modifications while maintaining the speed and manoeuvrability for an extremely low-level, precise and deep-penetration raid. Operation Chastise required the Lancasters to fly at tree-top height across enemy territory before dropping their specially designed ordnance within very precise parameters in order to destroy a series of dams. Various modifications were needed, and a design was produced codenamed Lancaster Type 464 (Provisioning). This would enter service as the Lancaster BIII Special, an aircraft type destined to only complete a single operation.

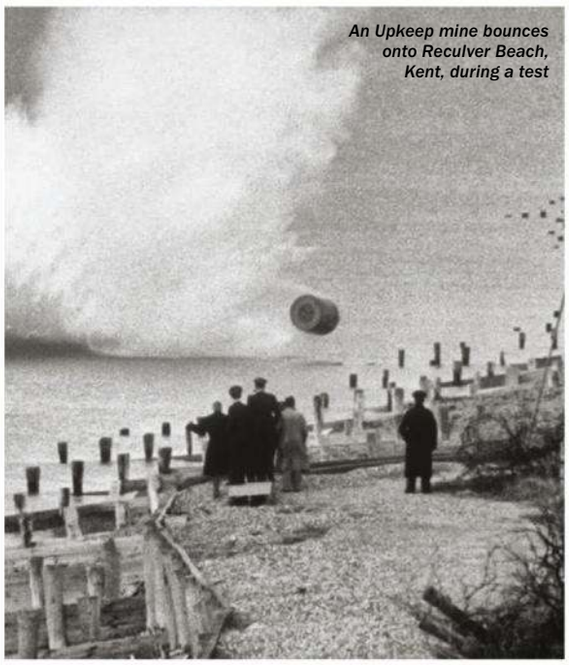
"WHEN AN AIRCRAFT WAS NEEDED FOR A SPECIAL OPERATION IN THE SPRING OF 1943 THE LANCASTER WAS THE OBVIOUS CHOICE"



Images: Alamy

ARMAMENT

The main armament of the BIII Special was the Upkeep mine. It was designed by renowned aviation designer Barnes Wallis, who developed it as a way to hit targets protected by torpedo nets. It would bounce across the surface before sinking to explode underwater, in the case of the dams at a depth of 29.9ft (9.1m). This used the pressure of the water to amplify the effects of the 6,600lb (2,994kg) of RDX explosives. Accommodating the oil-drum-like weapon and mechanism required removing the bomb bay doors and the mid-upper gun turret, leaving only six machine guns for defence.



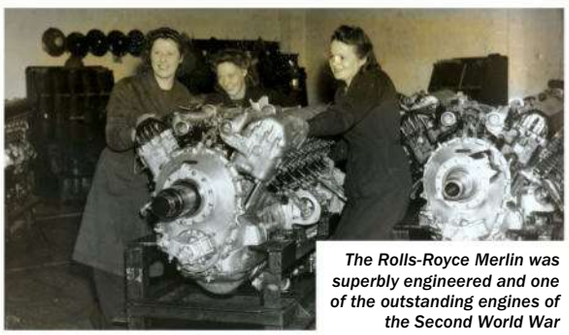
An Upkeep mine bounces onto Reculver Beach, Kent, during a test

***Left:** Only the rear (pictured) and front turrets were installed on the BIII Special*

The tremendous size of the Lancaster's bomb bay made it ideal for carrying a range of non-standard weapons

This digitally rendered image of a BIII Special shows the modifications to the fuselage

"POWERFUL AND RELIABLE, IT POWERED SOME OF THE ALLIES' MOST SUCCESSFUL FIGHTERS AND BOMBERS, AND ITS ICONIC SOUND STILL ELECTRIFIES AIR SHOW CROWDS TODAY"



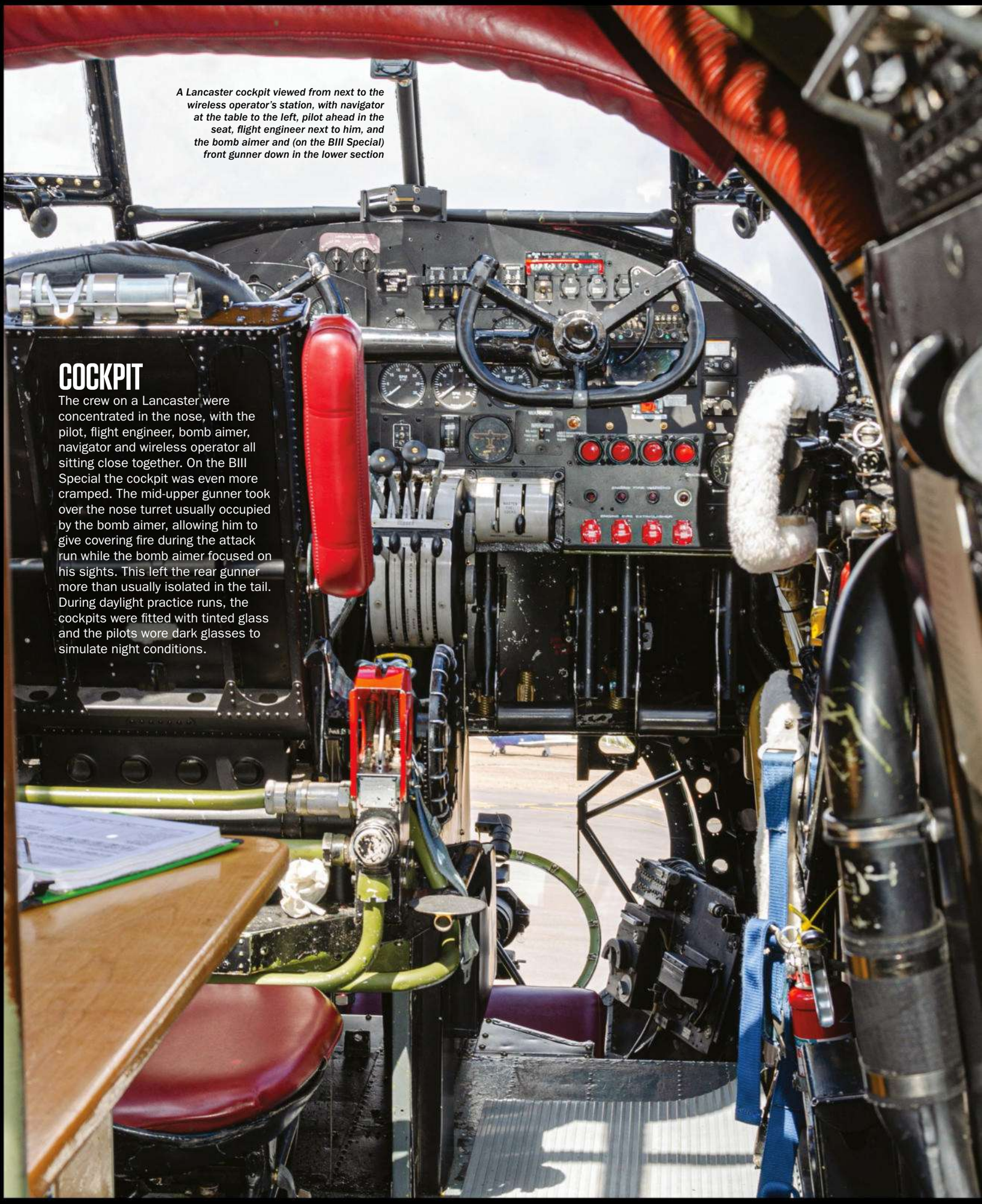
The Rolls-Royce Merlin was superbly engineered and one of the outstanding engines of the Second World War

A Merlin engine undergoing maintenance on a surviving Lancaster in Canada

Images: Alamy, Getty

ENGINE

The BIII Special used four Rolls-Royce Merlin Mk 28 engines, generating 1300hp (969kW) each. The Merlin was a liquid-cooled 27-litre V-12 piston engine with a one-stage supercharger first designed in 1933. Nearly 170,000 were built of many marques, either in the UK or, such as the Mk 28s, by the Packard Motor Car Company in the US. It was arguably the most successful engine of the Second World War. Powerful and reliable, it powered some of the Allies' most successful fighters and bombers, and its iconic sound still electrifies air show crowds today.



A Lancaster cockpit viewed from next to the wireless operator's station, with navigator at the table to the left, pilot ahead in the seat, flight engineer next to him, and the bomb aimer and (on the BIII Special) front gunner down in the lower section

COCKPIT

The crew on a Lancaster were concentrated in the nose, with the pilot, flight engineer, bomb aimer, navigator and wireless operator all sitting close together. On the BIII Special the cockpit was even more cramped. The mid-upper gunner took over the nose turret usually occupied by the bomb aimer, allowing him to give covering fire during the attack run while the bomb aimer focused on his sights. This left the rear gunner more than usually isolated in the tail. During daylight practice runs, the cockpits were fitted with tinted glass and the pilots wore dark glasses to simulate night conditions.

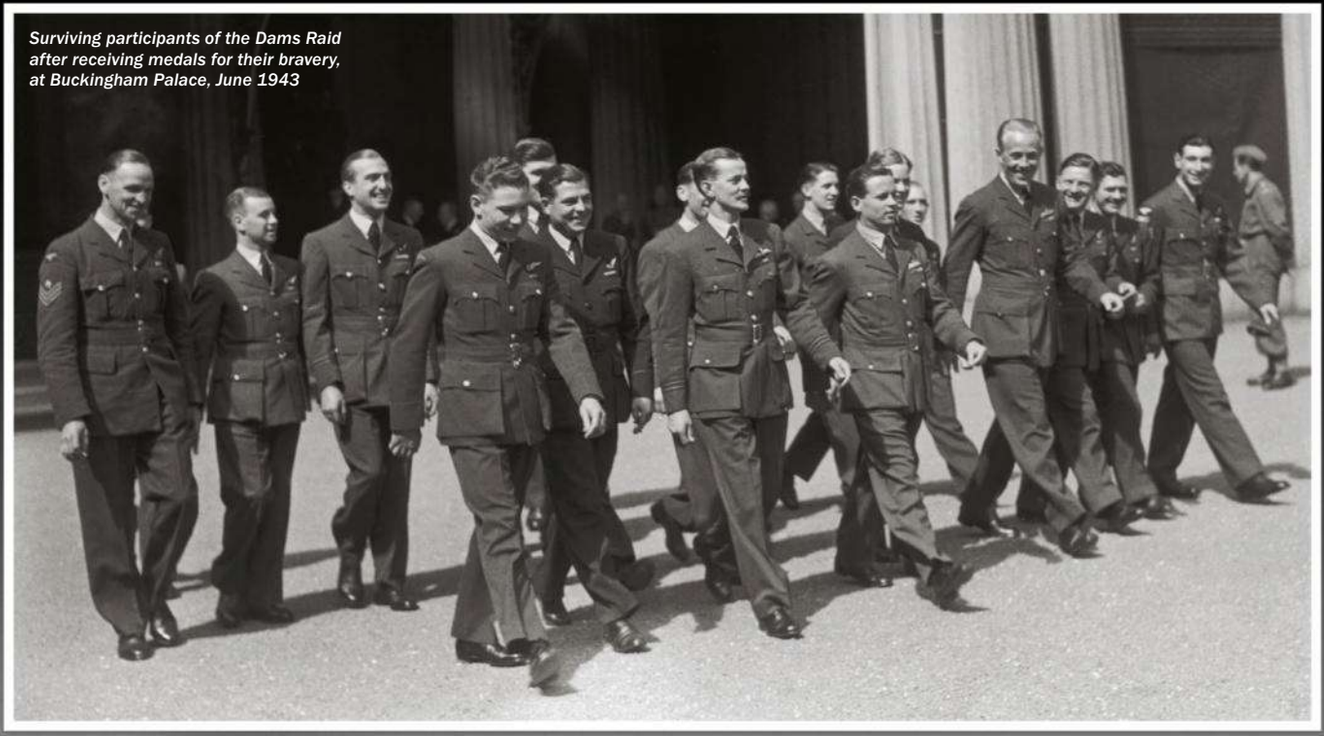
***Above:** This scene from film The Dam Busters shows the wooden sight being used to gauge the exact distance from the dam*

***Below**: An Upkeep bomb at Imperial War Museum Duxford*

DESIGN

The Lancaster had a mid-fuselage cantilever wing design, with the main spar running above the bomb bay (unlike its contemporary, the Handley Page Halifax, whose main spar cut through it, limiting capacity). This allowed ample space for both the bulky Upkeep and the equipment needed to give it the reverse spin that enabled it to work. The motor was in the forward section of the bomb bay, which was fared over, while the mine itself hung down in brackets partially outside the aircraft. Lights used to accurately measure altitude were also fitted under the fuselage.

Images: Alamy



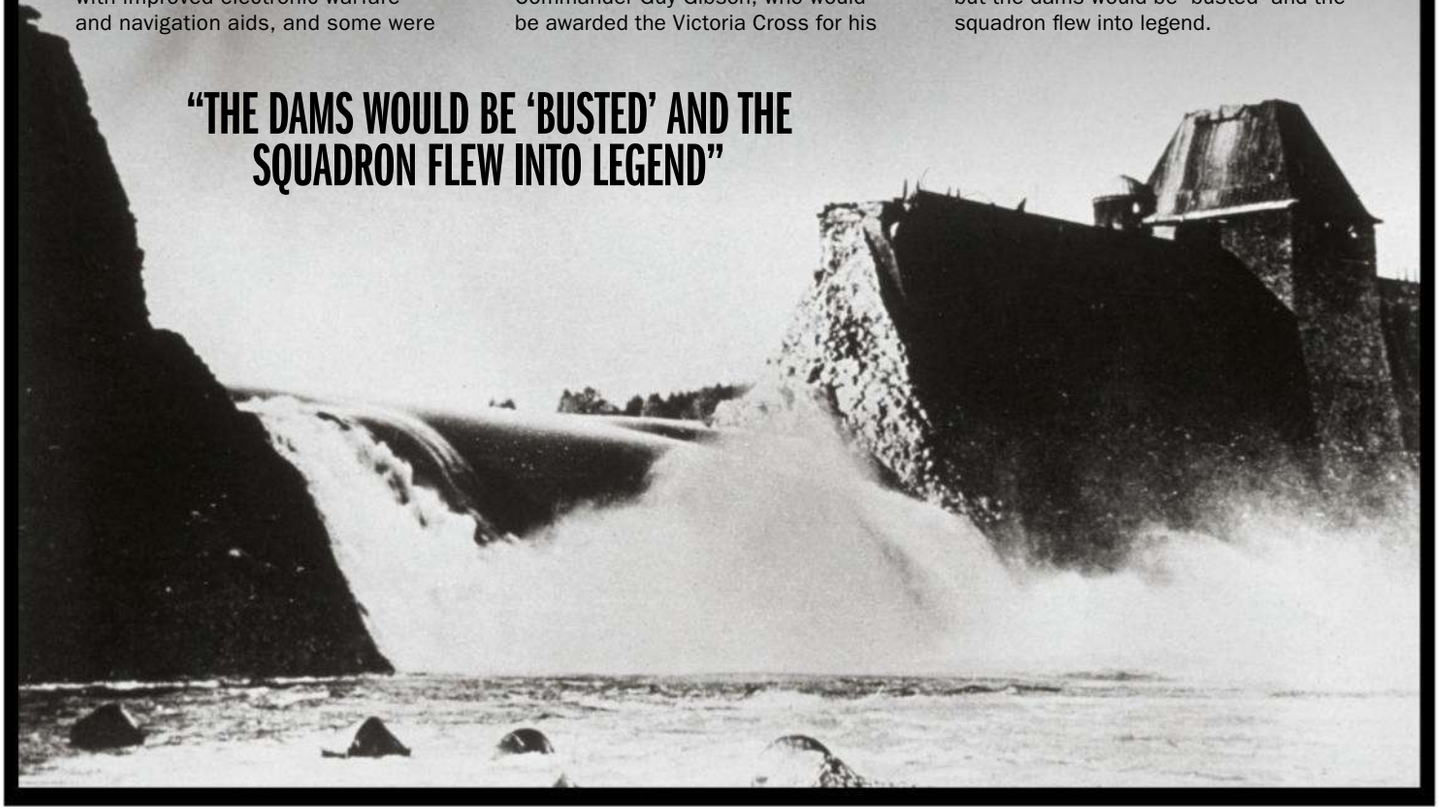
Surviving participants of the Dams Raid after receiving medals for their bravery, at Buckingham Palace, June 1943

SERVICE HISTORY

The Avro Lancaster entered service in 1942, and was the main British heavy bomber until the end of the Second World War, carrying 60 percent of the tonnage Bomber Command dropped during the conflict. It went through numerous upgrades and modifications, with improved electronic warfare and navigation aids, and some were modified to take the immense 11,905lb (5,400kg) Tallboy and 22,046lb (10,000kg) Grand Slam bombs, or for air sea rescue and testing purposes.

The BIII Special was only used for one operation – the attack on the Ruhr dams in May 1943. Of the 23 built, 18 BIII Specials of 617 Squadron were despatched under the leadership of Wing Commander Guy Gibson, who would be awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions that night. The attacks had to be made at extremely low but precise levels over water, the perfect target for enemy fire, and the bombs dropped a certain distance from the dams. Seven of the BIII Specials failed to return, and of the 56 aircrew lost just three survived, testament to the extremely hazardous nature of their low-level flying, but the dams would be 'busted' and the squadron flew into legend.

"THE DAMS WOULD BE 'BUSTED' AND THE SQUADRON FLEW INTO LEGEND"



Images Alamy

WIN AN AIRFIX 617 SQN DAMBUSTERS 80TH ANNIVERSARY GIFT SET

WORTH £54.99

History of War readers have the chance to win one of two model sets in tribute to the anniversary of RAF No. 617 Squadron

Marking 80 years since the raid on the Ruhr dams in May 1943, Airfix has released this special anniversary gift set. Inside you'll find an Avro Lancaster BIII (Special) and F-35B model kit, instruction sheets, paint layout, decals, paint, glue and brush. For more information please visit **uk.airfix.com**

To enter visit bit.ly/war120 or scan here:

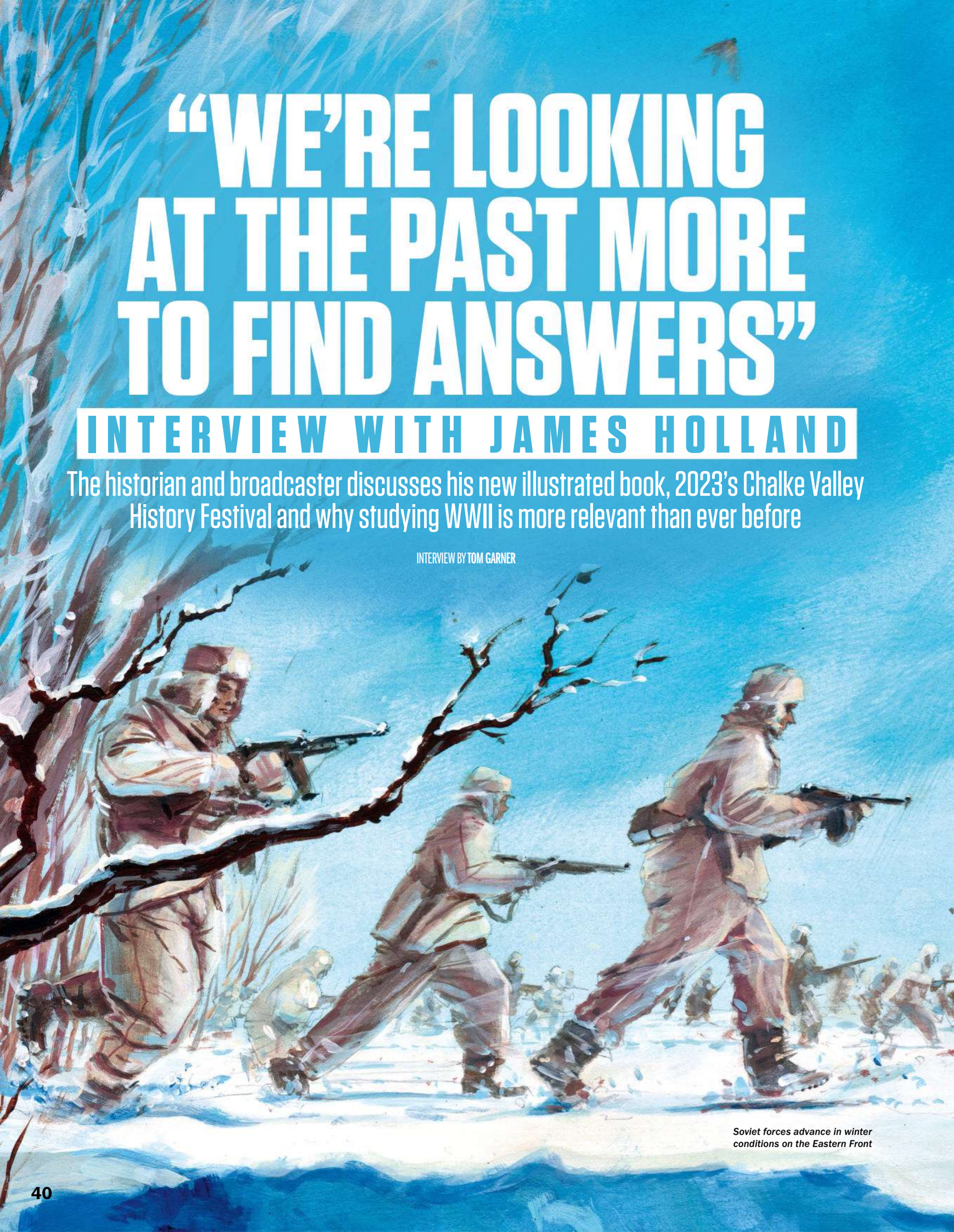
Terms & conditions The competition is open to UK entrants only. Under 18s must obtain parental consent to enter this competition and be able to demonstrate this to History of War's reasonable satisfaction. Answers must be received by 00:00GMT on 08/06/2023. The winner will be selected at random from all entries received and will be sent the prize free of charge. The prize is non-transferable and non-refundable. There is no cash alternative. For full terms and conditions, please go to www.futureplc.com/competition-rules/.

"WE'RE LOOKING AT THE PAST MORE TO FIND ANSWERS"

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES HOLLAND

The historian and broadcaster discusses his new illustrated book, 2023's Chalke Valley History Festival and why studying WWII is more relevant than ever before

INTERVIEW BY **TOM GARNER**



Soviet forces advance in winter conditions on the Eastern Front

Far left: James Holland, co-host and producer of the We Have Ways Of Making You Talk podcast with comedian Al Murray

Left: Keith Burns has won several awards from the Guild of Aviation Artists and is also known for illustrating comics

A groundbreaking collaboration between bestselling historian James Holland and award-winning artist Keith Burns, *The Second World War: An Illustrated History* is a new account of the key battles and critical turning points in the conflict. Most books about the Second World War are illustrated with black and white photographs but *An Illustrated History* presents the war in full colour, bringing the text vividly to life and leaving nothing to the imagination.

The book is a compilation of volumes that Holland and Burns produced for Ladybird Books, the iconic illustrated brand within the Penguin Publishing Group. It is aimed at a wide audience, from history enthusiasts and prospective GCSE students to those who want to make sense of current events by putting them in an historical context.

Holland is the author of many non-fiction and fiction books about Second World War and has made extensive broadcasts for television and radio. He is also the co-founder of the annual Chalke Valley History Festival in Wiltshire. Speaking ahead of the publication of his new book, here Holland discusses writing complex history for a general audience, the continuing relevance of the Second World War and this year's upcoming festival.

A LADYBIRD HISTORY

What was the idea behind writing The Second World War: An Illustrated History?

It's a compilation of the books I wrote for Ladybird Books. Their editor asked if I would be interested in doing a series of 12 books on the Second World War and I jumped at it because Ladybird Books are iconic. It also meant I could work with Keith Burns, whose work I knew, and frankly he's a genius. There isn't a book like this. It's nice to have the individual Ladybird books but it's also good to have a single volume of them. It was a no-brainer, really.

How does it feel to have published books about the Second World War as part of the Ladybird brand?

It's incredibly fulfilling because as a kid I had all the iconic Ladybird history books about Henry V, Alfred the Great, etc. Ladybird still has the same ethos and principle today by having lovely illustrations and being well-informed. I've got quite strong feelings about that war and how it should be told, although you're limited with Ladybird because they're quite short books and it's a massive subject. But it's a good place to write about the war with a slightly fresh take on it.

How difficult is it to condense such a complex war into a book for a popular audience?

It's a real problem. It works out at about 300 words a page and it's very easy to overrun that. You have to pare back the information all the time. It's tricky because there's so much you have to leave out but I've done quite a lot of TV and that's a good practice run for it. In television you have to cut to the chase and reduce your word length the whole time. For the Ladybird books you have to find the essence and work out the key points you want to put across. Then you work backwards from that.

"LADYBIRD STILL HAS THE SAME ETHOS AND PRINCIPLE TODAY BY HAVING LOVELY ILLUSTRATIONS AND BEING WELL-INFORMED"

Is there anything new you learned about the war while writing the book?

I was pretty familiar with all of it but there are important events in there that people might not know about, such as the Battle of Medjerda in North Africa. It was an incredible British victory and one of those rare battles where everything went according to plan. It was won by General Francis Tuker, who commanded the 4th Indian Division. He was subordinated to X Corps, which had been in the British Eighth Army but for this battle it was attached to the First Army.

Tuker was a brilliant commander and he was one of those people who never quite reached the heights he should have done. Medjerda was really interesting because it was a complete victory. One of the reasons that no one remembers it is because it went so brilliantly. Because it was perceived as a walkover, people assumed that the battle must have been easy. However, it worked because it was a perfect coordination of firepower, air and land working in tandem. Everyone knew what they had to do and did it in exactly the right way.

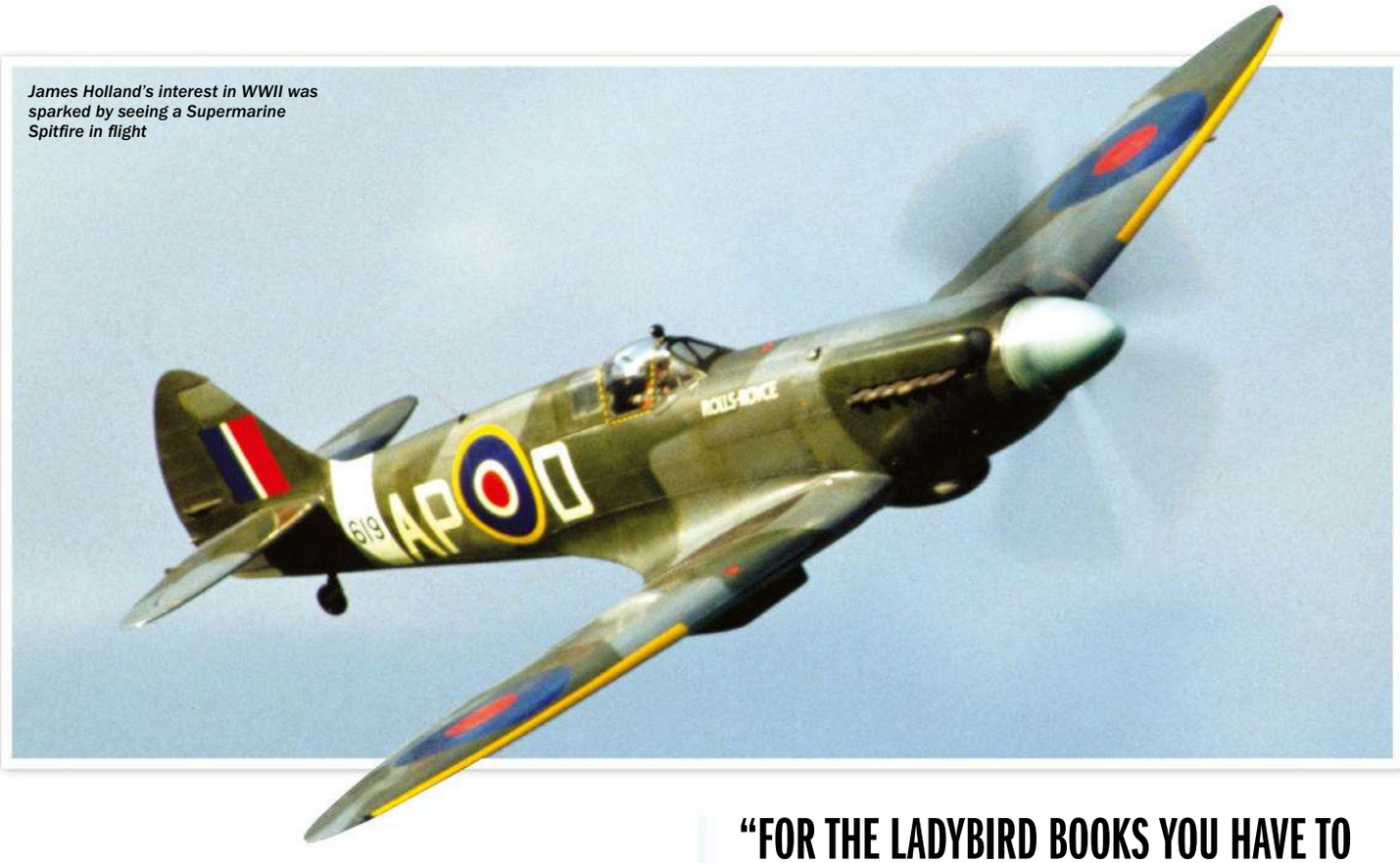
Which aspect of the conflict interests you the most?

I don't think I have a particular area that interests me the most within Second World War history because I tend to get interested in whatever I'm writing about. I've written the least about the Pacific War but I would like to

Images: Alamy, Keith Burns, Willy Wilkinson

Adolf Hitler consults with his inner circle at his Alpine retreat

German land and aerial forces conduct a blitzkrieg campaign



James Holland's interest in WWII was sparked by seeing a Supermarine Spitfire in flight

revisit Guadalcanal and write more about it. I'm also very interested in the US Navy submarine operations, which was great to write about in this book although I haven't written about it in-depth elsewhere.

The whole war is endlessly fascinating. The human drama is why we're all interested in it. There's that thought of: "What would I have done if I had been caught up in it?" which some of us might have thought particularly during the Covid lockdowns. The Second World War was a different level to the pandemic and I think our minds have sharpened since the invasion of Ukraine.

Although it is a general history, is there any particular point that you wanted to put across to readers?

There is a slightly jaundiced, tired view about the Second World War that is not so prevalent now but which dominated from the 1960s to the first decade of the 21st century. This view was that the Germans had the best army but Hitler was mad and the Americans had the most machinery. The British just hung off the coattails of the Americans and it was the Soviet Union that really won the war. The trouble is that view is very problematic and I don't think that's how it was at all.

The overarching idea I'm trying to put across about the Second World War is that we focus on the tactical and strategic aspects. The tactical is the kinetic, fighting bit – the pilot in the Spitfire, the tank crews, advancing infantry, gunners, etc. These are the people who are actually involved in the fighting. The strategic bit is the overview – what you are trying to achieve, how you get to Berlin or wherever [the target] might be. That's the strategy.

There is also a third level, which is operational. In other words, how you fight your wars. Before the Russo-Ukraine War we were looking at all these infographics, which looked much bigger for Russia than Ukraine. However, at an operational level these pieces of information have counted for very little, particularly for the Ukrainians.

This can also be applied to the Second World War. It's not what you've got but how you use it. It's about how you organise logistics, factories, resources – all of these are

"FOR THE LADYBIRD BOOKS YOU HAVE TO FIND THE ESSENCE AND WORK OUT THE KEY POINTS YOU WANT TO PUT ACROSS. THEN YOU WORK BACKWARDS FROM THAT"

at the operational level. This has been almost completely absent from the narrative of the Second World War from the 1960s to about 2005.

I was very keen to get that perspective back in so there is a lot about how you supply wars and the factories, farming, etc. It helps to feed the operational level into the whole perspective about the war.

What are your thoughts about Keith Burns' illustrations?

The illustrations are absolutely amazing and really do add something. I collect together a load of source photos for him, which he can effectively turn into illustrated versions or use them as inspiration for mood pieces. Keith is really good at suggesting movement and his pictures are always energetic. I've watched him work and he's unbelievable. If you say to him: "Can you do a sketch of a Messerschmitt?" he'll just be able to do it.

SPITFIRE CONVERSION

When did you first become interested in the conflict?

It's a really weird one. I was always interested in history as a boy and studied it at A-Level and university. I studied a lot about Early Modern Europe and the Restoration period of the 1660s-80s but in terms of more modern history I only got as far as Reconstruction in the United States. I never studied any 20th century history at all at university.

Later on, I was playing cricket one day and suddenly there was this machine pirouetting around in the sky beyond midwicket. I turned to the umpire and said: "What is that?" and he said: "That's a Spitfire!" It was a kind of Damascene moment and love at first sight. I thought this aircraft was the most incredible thing I'd ever seen.

I've got a slightly obsessive nature and literally the next weekend I was at a flying festival at IWM Duxford. On the

Images: Alamy, Keith Burns, Willy Wilkinson

A depiction of chaotic desert warfare in North Africa

first day there were all these Second World War planes lined up and I thought they were amazing. I then went around a lot of second-hand bookstalls and found a book called *Spitfire Pilot* by David Crook, who was in 609 Squadron during the Battle of Britain. It was a very honest account and his character really shone through. He wrote it almost immediately after the battle in 1942 based on his diary. His squadron had been based in Middle Wallop, which was the nearest Fighter Command base to where I had been brought up. That was where it all began.

Why do you think the war looms so large in the British public's imagination despite the passage of 80 years?
There are a number of reasons. The main reason is that it's still so relevant. You're still seeing the fallout of the Second World War because it had such a strong effect not just in Europe but globally. For all the major combatants I don't think there is another period of greater human drama than that.

Also, because it's still so comparatively recent there's lots of evidence, documents, footage, photographs, etc, so it's very easy for people to access. The Tudor period, for example, is not so accessible in that "the past is a foreign country" and all that. We can have a fairly good idea about the Tudors but a lot of that stuff has gone and it's too far back in time. Obviously, it is still incredibly interesting but the reason that the Second World War is more accessible than say, the Hundred Years' War, is because it's closer and we can understand it better. Every time you think: "Perhaps it's time to close our interest in the Second World War?" events like the Ukraine war make it all the more relevant again.

Is there an argument to say that Britain's continued interest in the Second World War has had an adverse effect on how it sees itself today?
Yes and no. One of the things that's interesting if you look back at the war in Europe is the question: "How much 'bad' were the Allies doing by doing 'good'?" Liberating people and getting rid of the Nazi yoke is all very well but if lots of people are getting killed in the process and whole cities are being razed to the ground it becomes very complex.

There is, quite rightly, no debate about the Holocaust because it was an abomination and one of the most despicable acts in human history. However, there are other aspects of the Second World War that are debatable such as the strategic air campaign over Germany, Italy or other towns in northwest Europe. Of course all of this culminates in the atomic bomb. These are big decisions and big moral dilemmas, and within all this an astonishingly huge human drama was being played out.

These add a layer of nuance and interest to the whole topic. However, I don't think you should look at the Second World War through nostalgic glasses at all. We in Britain can probably believe that we were on the side of the right – I don't think there's any issue about that – but there are a host of moral conundrums that make the whole subject even more interesting.

A FESTIVAL OF HISTORY

Chalke Valley History Festival has been running for over ten years. What was your original idea for it?
Everything seems to come back to cricket with me! I had just helped to build a new cricket ground and we needed a bit more money, so I said to [historical fiction writer] James Heneage: "Why don't we do an arts festival here?" He agreed but as we're both interested in history we decided to do a history festival instead. We did a very small event in 2011 and it went quite well. It was James who pushed it to be bigger and I suggested we introduce living history re-enactors. We really upped our game and now it is a proper festival of history rather than a history festival with add-ons.

What have been some of your personal festival highlights?
Definitely the Spitfires coming in overhead. I also remember the Lancaster bomber flying low over the crowds – that was a very special moment.

We've had some amazing people come over the years, such as [Second World War test pilot] Eric 'Winkle' Brown. I really love the living history re-enactments and it's great watching kids being transfixed by it. We've also had a lot of fun with things like our comedy panel show called Histrionics. Ian Hislop often attends and we've also had Harry Enfield, John Sessions and Paul Whitehouse come as well. It's been an amazing group of people who have taken part and it's pretty special when you've got a tent of 700 people laughing their heads off with these giants of comedy on stage. You have to pinch yourself.

What can visitors look forward to this year?
There's never been a better time to put on a history festival. People are really interested in history at the moment and I see it absolutely everywhere. I see it on magazine shelves in WH Smith, in computer games, TV dramas, books, podcasts and documentaries.

I think [the reason] people are particularly interested right now is because we're going through such tumultuous times. We're looking at the past more to find answers to the present and future. We try to reflect that a little bit in the programme. We've introduced a whole series of themes: Conflict, Politics, Science and Exploration, Sport, Society, and Culture and Environment.

Everything we do, whether it be living history or discussion, all falls into one or more of these categories. We have events about Ukraine, economics, the state of the Union and China. There are also parallels with events in the past. There is an incredible programme this year with some amazing speakers talking on a wide range of subjects. It's going to be really exciting.

The Second World War: An Illustrated History is published by Penguin Michael Joseph on 25 May 2023. To purchase a copy visit: **www.penguin.co.uk**

Chalke Valley History Festival takes place near the village of Broad Chalke in Wiltshire

Images: Alamy, Keith Burns, Willy Wilkinson

Daily Mail Chalke Valley History Festival

To book tickets and for more information about this year's Chalke Valley History Festival visit: **www.cvhf.org.uk**

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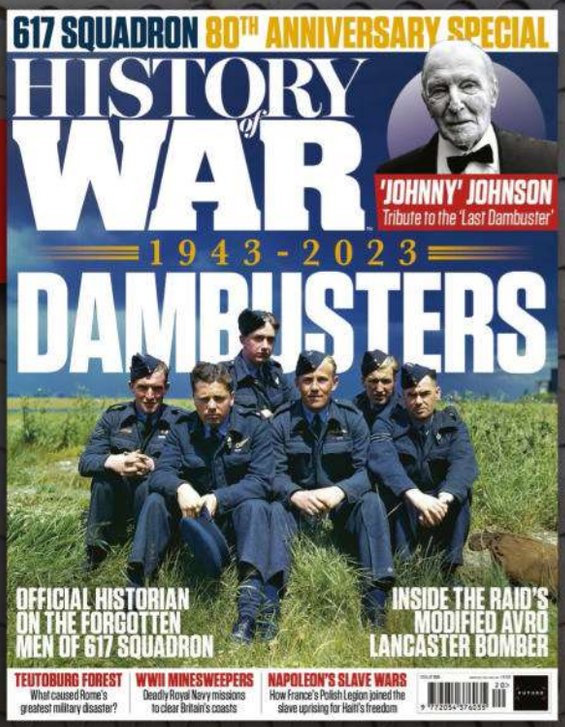
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'JOHNNY' JOHNSON
Tribute to the 'Last Dambuster'
1943-2023
DAMBUSTERS
OFFICIAL HISTORIAN ON THE FORGOTTEN MEN OF 617 SQUADRON
INSIDE THE RAID'S MODIFIED AVRO LANCASTER BOMBER
TEUTOBURG FOREST
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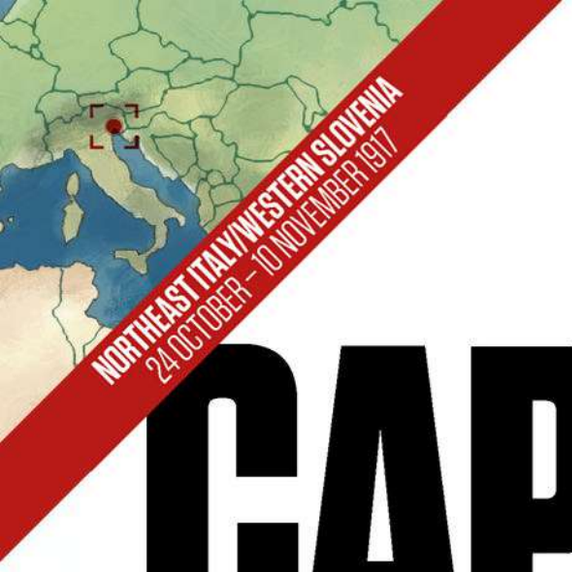


NORTHEAST ITALY/WESTERN SLOVENIA
24 OCTOBER – 10 NOVEMBER 1917

CAPORETTO

In 1917 Italy suffered its worst military defeat, causing shockwaves that be would felt for decades to come

WORDS **NICK SOLDINGER**

At 2am on 24 October 1917, Austro-German forces unleashed a devastating artillery attack against Italian troops defending land they'd captured in a long series of brutal and costly offensives. It was the opening salvo in a battle that would lead to one of the greatest military catastrophes of the First World War.

Over the next six hours, approximately two million shells pummelled the Italian line along the Isonzo River. After two-and-a-half years of a vicious war fought in a dramatic, often frozen landscape thousands of feet up in the clouds, the Italian defences were well-built. Earthworks and underground bunkers had been dynamited and drilled into the region's mountainous terrain, while an elaborate trench system stretched across the valley floors below. Although these had proven resilient in the face of previous artillery attacks, they could do little to protect the Italian troops from the horror that now rained down upon them.

Approximately 10 percent of the shells fired that morning contained phosgene gas. Although the use of chemical weapons was commonplace on the Western Front, poison gas had never been used before in the so-called White War that raged in the Alps. The Italian high command had completely underestimated the power of this new terror weapon and its troops were ill-equipped to deal with it. The results were devastating.

At 8am, the Austro-German infantry assault began. As it advanced in a pincer movement to seize the river crossing at Caporetto, it encountered little resistance from what had been a numerically superior force. The gas attack had been so effective that hundreds of Italian troops now lay dead in their defences without having fired a shot. Thousands more, meanwhile, were fleeing the battlefield and heading west.

What unfolded next would have disastrous consequences for Italy, creating social and political upheaval for years to come. And, although Italy's troops would be accused of cowardice, responsibility for the disaster was largely due to the shortcomings of one man.

The White War

By the time the First World War broke out on 28 July 1914, Italy's chief of staff General Luigi Cadorna was a career staff officer on the brink of retirement. A strict disciplinarian from an aristocratic background, he was privileged and autocratic, with a reputation for arrogance and a history of mistreating his men. In many ways he embodied Europe's old order and, like Italy itself, he was ill-equipped to fight the modern, industrialised war into which he'd soon find himself plunged.

The country had been part of the Triple Alliance, a defensive pact it had formed with Imperial Germany and the Austro-Hungarian

OPPOSING FORCES

A soldier surveys the bloody aftermath of fighting along a road in the Julian Alps

© Getty

Empire in 1882. Rather than side with its allies at the outbreak of war, however, the country's political leadership kept Italy out of the conflict until they'd weighed up the odds.

By the spring of 1915, they'd picked a side and on 26 April signed a secret agreement known as the Treaty of London. During a clandestine meeting, Italy's Prime Minister Antonio Salandra pledged support to Britain, France and Russia in exchange for promises of land. Crucially, this included the Italian-speaking regions of Trieste and Trentino on Italy's northeast border, both of which were under Austro-Hungarian control. The Triple Alliance was now in tatters and Italy's fate had been sealed.

On 23 May, Italy declared war on its former allies, and its armies under Cadorna's command invaded Austro-Hungarian territory to the north and northeast. As a younger man, Cadorna had written a manual on infantry tactics that stressed the need for offensive decisiveness. He now threw his ill-prepared army into a series of large-scale assaults against Austro-Hungarian defences strung across the Alps. By the autumn of 1917, however, Cadorna's great offensive campaign had advanced no more than 10 miles (16km) into Austro-Hungarian territory. He'd managed to capture and lose a few mountains in the process, but otherwise the two countries' borders remained largely unchanged.

The price his troops had paid for this hubris had been exorbitant. Around 250,000 men had been killed and a further 750,000 were wounded in the fighting.

This horrific casualty rate was down to several factors. Despite outnumbering the Austro-Hungarian forces by around three-to-one, the Italian troops lacked sufficient artillery, equipment, supplies and training. These inadequacies had a corrosive effect on morale and were exacerbated by Cadorna's style of leadership. He refused to review his

Weary troops stand guard over Italian prisoners of war captured during the Battle of Caporetto

Venice
Treviso
Feltre
Asolo
Nervesa
Arsiero
Vicenza
01 GAS BARRAGE
On 24 October 1917 Austro-German forces launch a six-hour artillery barrage along the eastern flank of the Italian Front. Approximately 200,000 poison gas shells are unleashed, causing chaos in the Italian ranks.
02 PINCER ATTACK
At 8am, Austro-German stormtroopers attack in a pincer movement. Sweeping down from the Bovec Basin in the north and up from Tolmin in the south. Their target is Caporetto, the weakest point in the Italian defences.
03 ITALIANS ROUTED
By the evening of 24 October, Caporetto has fallen, the Austro-Germans have advanced 14 miles (22.5km) along the front and the Italian line is disintegrating. Several thousand Italian troops have been killed or wounded and upwards of 20,000 taken prisoner.
1
5
6
7
8
Spresiano
Fosata
Zenson
Adriatic Sea
W
S
Frontier
German/Austrian front line (1st November)
German/Austrian attacks
German/Austrian front line (6th November)
German/Austrian front line (12th November)
Italian front line (12th November)

Map illustration: Rocío Espín

08 ADVANCE HALTED

On 10 November Italian forces retreat a further 40 miles (64km) to the far side of the Piavé River. Here, in territory that's easier to defend and reinforced by an Anglo-French force, the Italians finally stop the Austro-German advance which by now is stretched to breaking point.

07 BRIDGEHEAD ESTABLISHED

On 7 November the Austro-Germans launch another offensive against the Italians on the far side of the Tagliamento River. The Italian line again collapses and von Below's men are able to cross the river and establish a bridgehead.

04 MOUNTAIN CLEAR-OUT

With Austro-German troops rapidly advancing along the Venetian Plain on 24-25 October, specialist German alpine units are now sent in to clear out the surrounding Italian strongholds in the mountains. Thousands more Italians surrender as their positions are overwhelmed.

05 ITALIANS RETREAT

The Italian line collapses during 26-30 October and its forces retreat en masse almost 50 miles (80km) to the southwest. They are pursued and harried all the way by von Below's fast-moving stormtroopers.

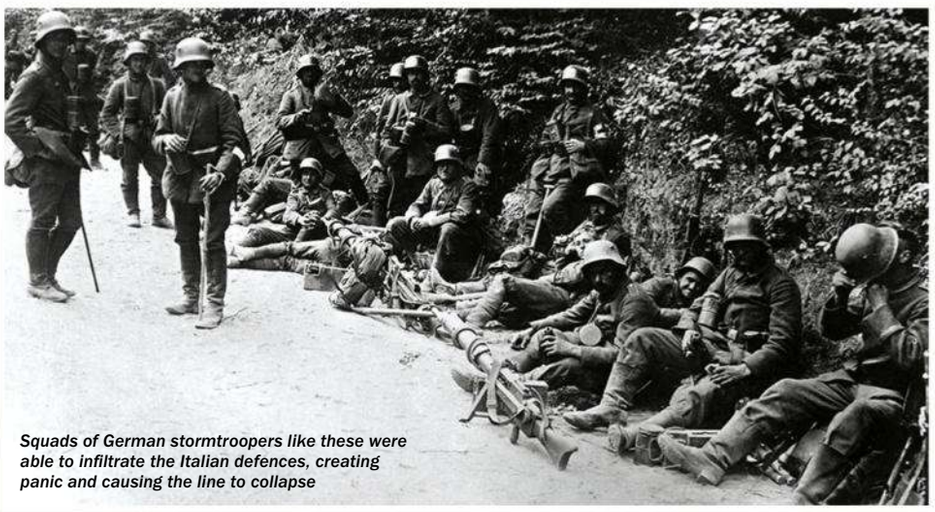
06 DESPERATE DEFENCE

Under constant attack, Italian troops now mount an operation on 30 October – 2 November to retreat to their last organised defences on the far side of the Tagliamento River. The hope is to reestablish the line and halt the Austro-German advance.

tactics and blamed everyone but himself for the failures. He dismissed or demoted over 800 senior officers whom he felt showed a lack of "offensive spirit", while 750 enlisted men under his command were executed by firing squad, the highest number of any army in the war. At one point he even threatened to reinstate the Roman punishment of decimation (killing one in 10 men in a unit) believing it would encourage his troops to fight that bit harder.

If all this wasn't bad enough, the conditions Cadorna's men had to fight in were among the most brutal of the war. With Austro-Hungarian forces occupying a chain of high-altitude fortifications, the Italians literally found themselves fighting an uphill battle. A typical assault would see them scrambling under fire up impossibly steep slopes on rocky terrain that offered little cover while amplifying the lethal effect of artillery as it shattered and splintered. As well as bullets and bombs, both sides also had to contend with hypothermia and frostbite. Avalanches were common, with an estimated 10,000 troops from both sides losing their lives to them in a single day on 13 December 1915.

"CADORNA RELUCTANTLY ORDERED HIS TROOPS TO DEFEND TO THE LAST MAN THE TERRITORY THEY'D CAPTURED"



Squads of German stormtroopers like these were able to infiltrate the Italian defences, creating panic and causing the line to collapse

Stalemate in the Alps

Since the opening days of the campaign, Cadorna had deployed his forces on two fronts, one facing north towards Trentino and the other towards Trieste in the east. It was the second of these, the one that ran along the fast-flowing Isonzo River, that witnessed the worst of the fighting and would become synonymous with Italy's sacrifice.

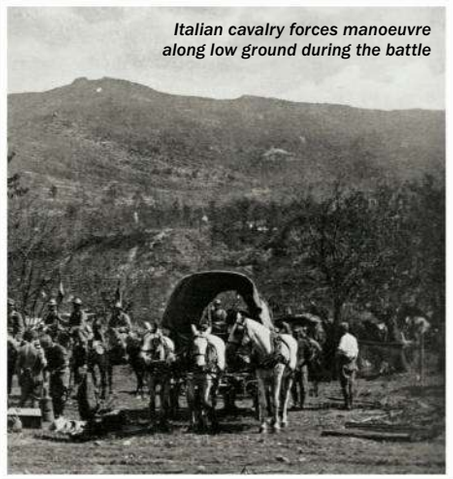
Between June 1915 and August 1917, Cadorna launched a series of major assaults there for little gain. The final one, the so-called 11th Battle of the Isonzo, was so brutal it left both sides exhausted. In fact, Cadorna's force was so weakened it was no longer capable of carrying out the offensive operations, for which he'd stubbornly insisted his men die. Reluctantly, he now ordered his troops to defend to the last man the territory they'd captured, particularly the high ground.

The Austro-Hungarian Army, meanwhile, was so depleted that its commanders feared it would finally break in the face of another attack. The concern was so great that an appeal for help was made directly to Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II. Up until now, the Germans had considered the Italian Front a sideshow but things were starting to change.

By the autumn of 1917, Russia was in turmoil. Control of the country was slipping

An Italian soldier takes up a position on an embankment, November 1917

After the front collapsed, Italian troops retreated around 80 miles (130km) back into Italy pursued by Austro-German forces



Italian cavalry forces manoeuvre along low ground during the battle

through the tsar's fingers into the hands of the Bolsheviks. Imperial Russia was being consigned to history and as it disintegrated, so did the war on Eastern Front. With no real enemy left to fight, the Austro-German forces stationed there were earmarked for redeployment to the Western Front. The Kaiser, however, sensing an opportunity, sent seven divisions under the command of General Otto von Below south to join the fight against the Italians.

Among the troops under his command were several specialist alpine units. He also had soldiers schooled in a new type of combat that had been specifically developed to overcome the stalemate of trench warfare. Known as Hutier tactics, after an officer who'd pioneered their development, it used intense artillery barrages to neutralise an enemy line so that it could be infiltrated and overcome by fast-moving shock troops known as stormtroopers.

The battle begins

On 24 October these tactics were put into action for the first time against the Italians around the town of Caporetto (now Kobarid in modern-day Slovenia). The front line sat approximately seven miles (11km) east of the river and von Below had identified the defences there as the weakest point in the Italian line. He planned to punch through it, advance at speed to isolate the Italian defenders on the high ground and drive westward into Italy's Friuli-Venezia Giulia province.

The offensive began at 2am with an intense artillery and gas bombardment. Designed to cut lines of communication and create chaos in the Italian ranks, it was even more effective than von Below could have hoped for. By the time it lifted at 8am and he sent in his stormtroopers, their advance was largely uncontested.

The weather helped. That morning a cold, thick fog had enveloped the area and visibility was poor, allowing the small agile groups of shock troops to slip through the Italian lines often unnoticed. The first those still defending their positions knew of the stormtroopers' presence was when they

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The Italian line was finally re-established along the Piavé River after the arrival of British and French troops

attacked from behind. Believing themselves to be surrounded, large groups of Italian troops now began surrendering to these infiltrating units and the line began to dissolve.

Cadorna's order to hold the mountains at all costs now saw his soldiers on the higher ground cut off as Austro-German forces swept through the valleys below. In just one morning, von Below had broken the Italian line with a classic pincer movement as his troops swept down from the Bovec Basin in the north and up from Tomlin in the south. The speed of the attack soon created panic among the Italian troops and they began to abandon their positions en masse.

One eyewitness account by Colonel Francesco Pisani of the Foggia Brigade, who was sent to defend the bridge at Caporetto only to discover that it was to be destroyed, perfectly captures the chaos of that day. "There was total confusion," he wrote afterwards. "The road was blocked by a mass of troops, carts, horses, trucks, artillery pieces, mules and supplies. It was very hard to execute or even transmit orders. The various components of the brigade became separated in the freezing fog and rain. There was no immediate command in the town of Caporetto itself. The order to destroy the bridge must have been given by a senior officer – but when? I concluded that the decision must have been based on the supposition that the enemy was still on the east bank of the Isonzo – but this was not at all the case. I was ordering the rearrangement of our remaining machine gun posts when at about 17.00hrs my few staff and I were confronted by a large group of German soldiers. They encircled us easily, threatening us with rifles and bayonets and disarmed us so quickly that there was barely time to think."

By the end of the day, von Below's troops had advanced around 14 miles (23km), seizing many key bridges along the way. In doing so, they had thrown the Italian Army into disarray. Thousands of its troops had been killed or injured while as many as 20,000 had been taken prisoner.

On 25 October, von Below sent in his alpine troops to clear the Italian strongholds in the mountains. Although these were now isolated, they still presented a threat to his army advancing along the Venetian plain below.

Among the units that successfully completed this mission was the Royal Württemberg Mountain Battalion, which included a young company commander by the name of Lieutenant Erwin Rommel. Rommel, of course, would go on to greater fame as the Desert Fox in the Second World War, but it was in the frozen mountains around Caporetto that he first made a name for himself. Over the next two-and-a-half days he and his 150 men captured 9,000 Italians, including 150 officers. His exploits would earn him the Order of Merit, Prussia's highest military honour, and make him a household name.

The front collapses

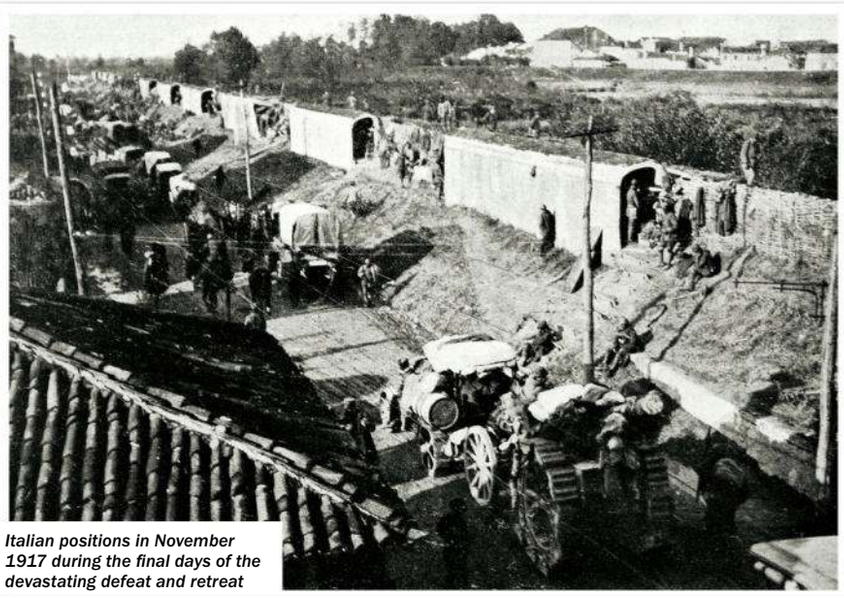
Unsurprisingly, Cadorna hadn't planned for the possibility of a retreat. Neither had he built an effective reserve to reinforce his line, and within two days the Italians were in full flight across the entire front. Not that Cadorna was about to accept responsibility for what was unfolding. Instead, he issued an official communication that put the blame squarely on the men under his command. It read: "Due to the lack of resistance of some units of the 2nd Army who cowardly retreated without fighting, or ignominiously surrendered to the enemy, the German-Austrian forces have been allowed to break through on our left flank. The valorous efforts of other troops were not, meanwhile,

German General Otto von Below masterminded the victory at Caporetto using a new type of warfare

Italian commander General Luigi Cadorna blamed the humiliating defeat on his troops, accusing them of cowardice

A young Erwin Rommel first won fame for his actions at Caporetto and was decorated for bravery

© Alamy, Getty



Italian positions in November 1917 during the final days of the devastating defeat and retreat

The battle saw 40,000 Italian troops killed or wounded as the badly led army was pushed back

able to stop the enemy from penetrating our country's sacred soil."

Cadorna's attempt to control the narrative backfired on him almost immediately. The following day, German aircraft dropped leaflets on the retreating Italian troops that told them: "Italians! General Cadorna's communication of October 28th opened your eyes to the enormous catastrophe that has hit your army. At this moment, so grave for your nation, your general has turned to a strange expedient in order to explain the disaster. He has had the audacity to accuse the army that has followed his orders to launch useless and desperate attacks many times! This is what you get in return for your valour! You have spilt your blood in many battles. Your enemy does not deny you the respect owed to such valorous adversaries. But your general has dishonoured you. He insults you to save himself!"

By 30 October the Italians had been chased back to the eastern banks of the Tagliamento River and Cadorna had little choice but to order his men to retreat to the far side. Under constant attack from von Below's troops, it took the Italians four arduous days to complete the operation.

The Italians' last pre-prepared defences were on the Tagliamento's western banks but they were unable to hold the line there for long either. On 2 November von Below's troops launched another attack, crossed the river and established a bridgehead.

Having now advanced more than 50 miles (80km) in just over a week, the Austro-German supply line was at breaking point and their attack began to falter. Finally freed from fighting a relentless rearguard action, what remained of the Italian force now regrouped and retreated a further 40 miles (64km) south to establish a new defensive line along the Piavé River.

Despite ongoing supply problems, von Below ordered his troops to go after them and on 10 November offensive operations were resumed. It was a high-risk strategy but the German general had no choice. He was running out of time.

The US had entered the war in April 1917 and by the autumn the first of its troops were

"YOUR ENEMY DOES NOT DENY YOU THE RESPECT OWED TO SUCH VALOROUS ADVERSARIES. BUT YOUR GENERAL HAS DISHONOURED YOU. HE INSULTS YOU TO SAVE HIMSELF!"

landing in France. Hundreds of thousands more would soon follow them across the Atlantic. If Italy could be knocked out of the war before they arrived, the Austro-German armies in the south could be sent to the Western Front. Once there, along with those troops no longer needed in the east, they could deliver a knock-out blow and win the war.

France and Britain were well aware of the danger, and they rushed 11 infantry divisions south by train to reinforce and resupply the Italians. They arrived just as von Below was launching a series of partially successful attacks. The new defensive line held, however, and the Italian Front once again settled into a stalemate and would remain static until the final weeks of the war.

The cost of defeat

Although fighting in the sector would continue well into the next year, the Battle of Caporetto officially ended on 10 November. By then, Austro-German casualties stood at around 50,000 killed or wounded while Italian losses were even worse. As well as suffering 40,000 killed or wounded, 300,000 Italian troops had been taken prisoner. A further 300,000 had become displaced and were largely unaccounted for, while a further 50,000 had officially deserted. Thousands of tonnes of materiel had also been captured, including over 3,000 artillery pieces and a similar number of machine guns which the poorly equipped Italian Army could ill afford to lose. The cost to the civilian population, meanwhile, had been devastating, with up to 1,000,000 refugees forced to flee the fighting as over 5,000 square miles (13,000 square km) of Italian territory had fallen into enemy hands.

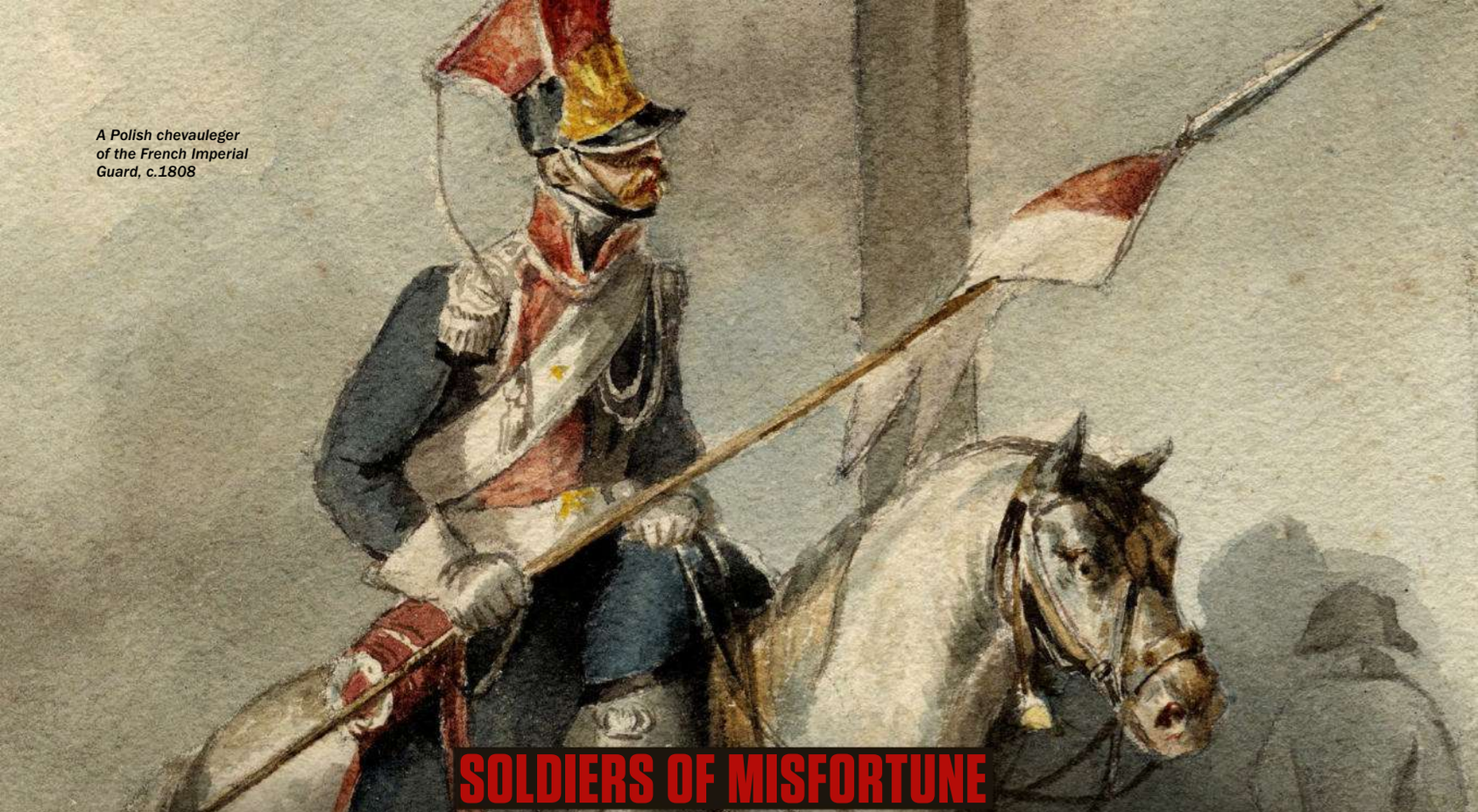
The catastrophe of Caporetto was more than just a military defeat for Italy. Its humiliation inflicted a trauma on the national psyche that was to have far-reaching consequences.

Even as the battle raged, Italy's Prime Minister Paolo Boselli had been forced from office. He was replaced by Vittorio Orlando, whose first act was to get rid of Cadorna and replace him with the more effective General Armando Diaz. But this change in Italy's leadership would not be enough to stop the schism now opening up in Italian society. Even Italy's ultimate victory at the Battle of Vittorio Veneto a year later couldn't heal the wound.

In the economic turmoil of the immediate post-war years, different factions sought to blame one another for the humiliation, and the ignominy of Caporetto tore Italian society apart. In doing so, it paved the way for Benito Mussolini, who exploited the tragedy and sense of national shame it invoked to fulfil his political ambitions.

According to Il Duce, defeat at Caporetto came about because of a weakness in Italian life caused by democracy and trade unions. He blamed liberals and socialists alike, arguing for the creation of a modern-day Rome over which he should rule supreme. He called this new ideology fascism and used a powerful, if contradictory, narrative to appeal to both radicals and traditionalists, one that promised a fairy-tale future based on a fantasy past.

In October 1922, almost five years to the day after the fall of Caporetto, Mussolini and 30,000 of his black-shirted thugs descended on the Italian capital and seized power. National pride would be restored, he declared, and a new Italy "as powerful as it was in the times of the Augustan empire" would be built. He vowed to make Italy great again but instead delivered disaster by establishing a brutal dictatorship and dragging his country into an even more cataclysmic war.



A Polish chevauleger of the French Imperial Guard, c.1808

SOLDIERS OF MISFORTUNE

NAPOLEON'S POLISH LEGIONS & THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

When the emperor sent his elite Polish fighters to put down an uprising, the Poles instead joined the rebels

WORDS **MAREK SOBIERALSKI**

In 1802, Napoleon sent a Polish legion of about 5,200 men to join the French forces in Saint-Domingue to put down the Haitian slave rebellion, having actually been told there was a revolt of prisoners there. The Poles had initially fought with Napoleon in the hope of receiving French support in restoring their own country's independence from its partitioners and oppressors – Prussia, Russia and Austria – who had divided Poland between them in the late 18th century.

After arriving in Saint-Domingue following a gruelling journey across the Atlantic Ocean, and being thrown straight into battle, the Poles quickly learned that the French were, in fact, trying to brutally crush an uprising by enslaved Africans fighting for freedom from their ruthless white masters. Many sympathised with their struggle and joined the ranks of the revolutionaries against the French.

Today's Polish Haitians (Poloné or La Pologne, in Haitian Creole) are Haitian people of Polish and African ancestry that dates back to those events, after which some 400-500 of these Poles are believed to have settled there after the war. They had been given special status as 'Noir' by the governor-general and emperor, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and full citizenship under the Haitian constitution.

The Republic of Haiti sits in the Caribbean, occupying the western part of the island of Haiti, in the Greater Antilles archipelago, which it shares with the Dominican Republic. The Caribbean Sea surrounds it to the west and south, and the Atlantic Ocean to the north. A former French colony, it is, at the time of writing, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere due to a debilitating mix of corruption, political instability and vulnerability to natural disasters, including hurricanes and earthquakes.

In the 15th century the island was inhabited by the Caribbean and Arawaks, but in 1492 it was 'discovered' by Christopher Columbus and as Hispaniola it became part of the Spanish colonial empire. During the 16th century the indigenous population was almost completely wiped out. The western part of the island was occupied by French pirates who founded Port-de-Paix in 1644. In 1697, under the Treaty of Rijswijk, part of the island where present-day Haiti is located passed into French rule as Saint-Domingue.

The Haitian Revolution, which spanned the years 1791 to 1804, was a result of the profound disparity in the social and material status of the inhabitants of the island, in particular the terrible situation of African slaves. In May 1790, they received news from the Kingdom of France, which was engulfed in revolution, about the adoption by the Constituent Assembly of equal rights for the colony's inhabitants.

At that time, the wealth of the Caribbean came from the demand for sugar in Europe and North America, from where plantation owners imported everything that was not produced on the islands. Coffee, cocoa, indigo and cotton were also grown in Haiti, but on a much smaller scale, and were not as profitable as sugarcane. Sugar production was very profitable, but it required cheap - or 'free' - labour, and this consisted of African slaves. The white planters were well aware of the numerical superiority of the slaves and lived in constant fear of an outbreak of rebellion. To prevent this and maintain obedience, they resorted to brutal physical violence. If a slave escaped or was disobedient, flogging was a common penalty

and was not only a punishment but also a lesson for others. More serious offences were punished with branding and even castration. In 1685 King Louis XIV issued the Code Noir edict, which regulated the treatment of slaves in the colonies, but as Laurent Dubois details in his work *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, the owners and overseers openly violated its provisions.

In 1758, white landowners began enacting laws limiting the rights of certain parts of the population, and a rigid three-caste system was established. The first were the white colonisers, or blancs. The second were free blacks (usually mixed race), or gens de couleur libres. Members of this class were usually educated and served in the army or held administrative functions on plantations. Many were the children of white planters and slave women. Men of this class sometimes gained freedom and estates from their white parents. Those in the third layer, outnumbering the other two by a ratio of 10:1, were mainly African-born slaves. Most slaves used the Patois language, a mixture of French and the languages of West African tribes, which became known as Creole.

Many runaways, known as Maroons, hid on the outskirts of large plantations and lived off what they could find or steal. Others fled to the towns, where they could mingle with the city slaves and newly freed slaves who most often resided there. Fugitives that were caught were severely punished, although some of the owners tolerated petit marronages, or short absences from plantations. Often, however, large groups hid in forests, organising armed attacks on cane or coffee plantations. Although the numbers in such groups increased periodically, they lacked the leadership and organisation to take more significant actions.

The first notable Maroon leader was the charismatic voodoo priest François Mackandal, who united the slave resistance movement. Mackandal brought together dispersed groups and also built a secret organisation on the plantations to lead the slaves against the whites. This rebellion lasted from 1751-57, and although Mackandal was finally captured and burned at the stake by the French in 1758 (as described by Jan Rogozinski in *A Brief History of the Caribbean*) large bands of armed Maroons continued to wreak havoc and destruction after his death.

The colony was the most profitable estate of the French kingdom and the richest colony in the Caribbean. The slave population on the island had reached almost 500,000, but due to the high mortality rate it had to be constantly replenished. Due to malnutrition, lack of adequate housing, clothing and medical care, every year 2-5 percent of the slaves died. In the north, slaves working in large groups on plantations lived in relative isolation, separated from the rest of the colony by a high mountain range known as Le Massif. In 1791, these slaves joined with urban slaves to participate in the insurrection.

At that time, about 40,000 whites were living on the island, among whom the sugar planters (grands blancs) constituted the aristocracy. Most returned to France as soon as possible to avoid the outbreaks of yellow fever that regularly hit the colony. Lower-class

"THE SLAVE POPULATION ON THE ISLAND HAD REACHED ALMOST 500,000"

whites (petits blancs) were engaged in crafts, shopkeeping, slave trading and guarding. Freed black men (gens de couleur) numbered over 28,000. Because their number was constantly growing, the colonial authorities introduced discriminatory regulations regarding how they were to dress and where they could live. Robert Heinl describes in *Written in Blood: The History of the Haitian People* how these regulations also limited their access to public office, although many of them were – like poorer whites – craftsmen and overseers or servants in the homes of the rich. Many of them would also lead the uprising.

In addition to class and race conflicts, there were also regional clashes between the various Departments on the island, as well as a constant struggle between loyalists who wanted to stay connected with France, supporters of the island's independence, and those who saw themselves allied with Spain or Britain – powers that would gladly take control of the prosperous colony.

The first uprising ended in defeat for the rebels, and its leaders Vincent Ogé and Jean-Baptiste Chavannes were executed. Over the next three years, armed uprisings took place with varying intensity but did not achieve anything significant. In 1793 the French colonial official Léger Félicité Sonthonax arrived on the island and announced the abolition of slavery. Meanwhile, there was an invasion of English and Spanish troops whose task was, among other things, to suppress abolitionist and republican sentiment. The immediate cause of the intervention was the beheading of King Louis XVI by revolutionaries in France. In 1795, the Spanish interventions ended, as did the British in 1798. During this period, groups of insurgents led by Toussaint Louverture began to achieve success, but Napoleon did not recognise his authority. In a letter to Dessalines, Louverture outlined his plans for defeating the French:

"Do not forget, while waiting for the rainy season which will rid us of our foes, that we have no other resource than destruction and fire. Bear in mind that the soil bathed with our sweat must not furnish our enemies with the smallest sustenance. Tear up the roads with shot; throw corpses and horses into all the foundations, burn and annihilate everything in order that those who have come to reduce us to slavery may have before their eyes the image of the hell which they deserve."

The Polish Legions were created in Italy, and their ultimate goal was to fight to regain Poland's independence. Following Poland's Third Partition, many soldiers and officers left for Italy and France. Thanks to Napoleon's influence, and through the Agency (a Polish emigrant organisation established in Paris after the fall of the Kosciuszko Uprising in 1794), General Jan Henryk Dabrowski signed an agreement with the new government of the Lombard Republic on 9 January 1797. The units received the name Polish Legions. Uniforms and banners were similar to Polish ones, and the language of command, as well as military ranks, were also Polish. The cockades pinned to the uniforms were tricolour, referencing the French Revolution and symbolising the alliance and protection of the Republic. Dabrowski guaranteed the volunteers Lombardian citizenship and the right to return to the country when Lombardy was free and safe.

By May 1797, about 7,000 had joined the ranks of the Legions. The soldiers were mainly exiled Poles, Polish prisoners and deserters from the Austrian Army, who were previously conscripted and forced to fight the French. Dabrowski introduced a modern command system in the legions that was modelled on the French one. He abolished corporal punishment and gave the possibility of promotion to soldiers of non-noble origin.

Napoleon was impressed by the skill and bravery of the light Polish cavalry who fought for the French

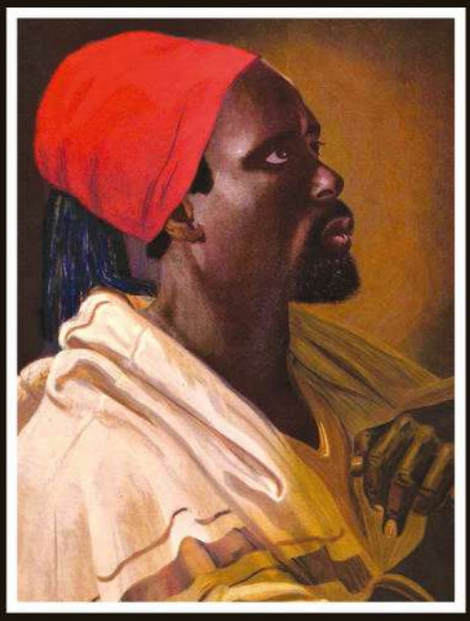
Images: Alamy, Getty

He ordered those who could not read or write to learn to do so, and to deepen their knowledge of Polish history. Estimates of the final strength of the Polish Legions vary, and it is believed that between 20,000 and 30,000 men served in their ranks at any one time over the course of their existence.

Initially, the Legions fought alongside Napoleon, the first time being at Rimini in April 1797. They quickly developed a reputation, and were involved in many major battles, including the Battle of Magliano on 1 December 1798, where the brigade under the command of Karol Kniaziewicz defeated the corps of the army of the Kingdom of Naples. In the Battle of Falari on 5 December 1798, the legionnaires repelled the attack of the Naples army. Between 17-19 June 1799, at the Battle of Trebbia (Trebbia River Valley), legionnaires fought alongside the French against the army of Alexander Suvorov. They suffered heavy losses, but were able to cover the French retreat. On 14 June 1800, at the Battle of Marengo (the decisive battle of Napoleon's second Italian campaign) they fought the Austrian army led by General Michael von Melas. Another notable event was on 3 December 1800, where at the Battle of Hohenlinden, the Danube Legion led by Kniaziewicz helped defeat the Austrian Army. The French had won successive victories over the anti-French coalition troops on many fronts. Great Britain withdrew from the coalition, and Austria made peace with France in Lunéville in 1801, but the war's end did not bring a positive solution to the Polish question. It caused disintegration in the army, a lot of doubt, and there was open criticism of French policy. The Polish legions were now an inconvenience for Napoleon.

In 1802, France sent most of the disgruntled legionnaires (two demi-brigades, 5,280 strong) to Haiti to put down the ongoing revolution. The now-inconvenient Polish units were accompanied by groups of German and Swiss-French allies and by French units that had fallen out of favour with Napoleon and the French high command. The first demi-brigade, No 113, after being incorporated into the French Army, numbered 2,810 soldiers and officers. The second, No 114, had 2,460 and arrived at Saint-Domingue in September 1802 and February 1803 respectively. The Poles arrived exhausted after an uncomfortable three-month sea voyage. They had been crammed into overcrowded ships, and the French had also provided them with faulty equipment. There was a lack of uniforms suited to the tropical climate, as well as unusable rifles. Despite these shortcomings and the poor physical condition of the soldiers, they were immediately sent into the thick of the action.

In November 1802, General Charles Leclerc died of yellow fever and was replaced by General Donatien de Rochambeau. The pacification units that were dispatched were ordered to kill anyone, including women and children, who were "suspected of supporting the rebellion". There was no mercy: they were hanged, choked with sulphur under the decks of old ships or thrown to be mauled to pieces by specially trained dogs imported from Cuba.



Toussaint Louverture (1743 – 1803) was a Haitian general and prominent leader of the Haitian Revolution

The Poles, famous for their bravery in Europe, were completely out of sorts in this new reality. Their French superiors complained about their "lack of courage and apathy". The legionnaires felt very insecure, unable to adapt to an irregular guerrilla war, being used to fighting in large formations and therefore finding it difficult to deal with clashes in smaller groups. And they suffered spectacular defeats. In Fort Petite Anse, the insurgents pushed three defending Polish companies into one building. When the defenders ran out of ammunition, the attackers set fire to the building, and most of the legionnaires were burned alive. In May 1803, another Polish unit was sent on a night attack near Les Cayes. Legionnaires were walking along the beach when they encountered a large Haitian camp, and the insurgents rushed to fight them with sabres and bayonets. Out of 40 legionnaires, 13 were killed, and many of those who survived died soon after from their wounds. Some successful undertakings of the Polish legionnaires included pirate raids that were carried out in the final phases of fighting in the Antilles. In one such case, they reached the coast of Mexico in 1805 on the galleon Mosquito and captured several British ships before selling the haul for a considerable profit and returning to Saint-Domingue.

The attitude of the insurgents toward the legionnaires changed during the course of the fighting. At first, they were treated worse than the French, which may have been down to the fact that the French had told the insurgents that Poles were cannibals. Soon, however, the locals discovered this was nonsense and began to look more sympathetically at the legionnaires. The similar situation of both peoples fighting for freedom, Polish and Haitian, was even understood by Dessalines, who would eventually call Poles "the white Negroes of Europe", which was regarded as a great honour as it meant brotherhood between Poles and Haitians.

"MANY POLISH SOLDIERS BECAME SYMPATHETIC TO THE FORMER SLAVES' CAUSE"

Ultimately, the Poles had little interest or desire to support the French cause in their distant colonies, fighting against people who only desired their own independence. Many Polish soldiers became sympathetic to the former slaves' cause. They deserted the French and supported Dessalines in significant numbers, with some claims of entire units changing sides, although there is some debate as to the actual rate of desertion. In any event, the Haitian campaign proved disastrous for the legionnaires. Combat casualties and tropical diseases, including yellow fever, reduced the 5,280-strong Polish contingent to a few hundred survivors in less than two years. By the time the French forces retreated from the island in late 1803, about 4,000 Poles had died (either from disease or combat). Of the survivors, about 400-500 remained on the island, a few dozen were dispersed to the nearby islands or the United States, and about 700 returned to France.

After a series of military defeats, the French troops were evacuated from the island, and on 1 January 1804 Haiti's independence was proclaimed. On 22 September, Dessalines became its emperor, and it was rumoured that his personal guard consisted of 30 Poles. The rebels appreciated the foreign deserters since they could serve well as artillerymen and instructors, and repair weapons. German and Swiss mercenaries are also mentioned here, but the Poles apparently enjoyed particular esteem. Some Polish soldiers who remained alongside the French refused to fully follow orders to murder the captured prisoners. Władysław Jabłonowski, who was of mixed race, was one such Polish general, but he died soon after reaching Saint-Domingue. The loss of that many patriotic military personnel in the Caribbean was a serious blow to Polish aspirations of regaining independence, and the Haitian experience cast further doubts among Poles about France's and Napoleon's good intentions toward Poland.

After Haiti gained its independence, Dessalines acknowledged the Poles and spared them when he ordered the massacre of nearly all French whites and many free people of colour on the island. He classified the Poles as Noir (black), who constituted the new ruling class, and granted them full Haitian citizenship under the constitution. Cazale became the centre of their community. The constitution of 1805 prohibited whites from settling or owning any land in the country, although this provision did not apply to Germans and Poles. Dessalines issued orders not only to spare Polish soldiers (even those serving on the French side) but also to grant them Haitian citizenship. He was motivated to do this by the belief that Poles, like Haitians, love freedom and had to fight for it many times, including during the revolution in Haiti. One of the commanders of the French contingent, Pierre Thouvenot, wrote about Polish soldiers to the Ministry of Navy and Colonies:

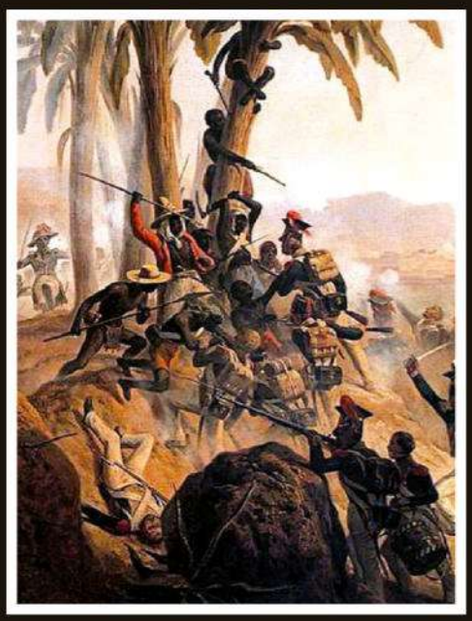
"These heavy and apathetic people, alien to our customs, at a great distance from their homeland, lose all their energy here, unable

to cope with the hardships of the marches and terrified of the dangers of a colonial war of which they have no understanding. It is impossible to use them except in garrisons, and even then it is dangerous to entrust them."

Two infantry battalions were formed from Polish soldiers in Haitian service, which were tasked with guarding the prisons holding the French. About 160 Poles asked Dessalines for the opportunity to leave Haiti, to which he agreed. They went to Jamaica, where Governor George Nugent obliged them to enlist in the British military, which they refused. They were sent back to Haiti, with a letter from the governor advising their expulsion. However, Dessalines declared that Poles were free citizens of the free country of Haiti and that he could not expel them.

The Haitian government twice reminded itself of the existence of the Poles. The first time was during the dictatorship of Papa Doc (1957-71), who hated the mixed-race elite and its French character, and at the same time was looking for Africophile symbols. At that time, he showed Poles as a model of love of freedom and courage, calling them the white Negroes of Europe once again. However, this did not prevent the massacre of 25 and the disappearance of 80 inhabitants of Cazale, inhabited by the descendants of the legionnaires, by the Tonton Macoute secret police in March 1969. The inhabitants of Cazale had refused to pay taxes on the sale of agricultural products, antagonising the regime. When mixed-race communist militants hid in the village, hoping to blend in among the Polonés, the Tonton Macoutes razed the village to the ground.

The second time was during Pope John Paul II's visit to Haiti. On 18 March 1983, Poles were taken to the François Duvalier airport in Port-au-Prince to welcome the pope. They were gathered



The Battle for Palm Tree Hill was just one of many bloody engagements during the Haitian Revolution

in the honorary sector so that they could directly exchange a few words with him. They heard from him an assurance of help, because "we are all Poles, and we must help each other".

The theatre director Jerzy Grotowski, intending to study Haitian culture for his own artistic experiments, managed to have the voodoo priest Amon Frémon, an inhabitant of Cazale with Polish origins, come to Poland in 1980. It is said that Frémon was deeply affected by the imposition of martial law in 1981 and by Solidarnosc's struggle against the communist dictatorship. A relatively recent documentary, *The Art of Disappearing*, reports that Frémon thought General Wojciech Jaruzelski, responsible for imposing martial law, was a victim of spirit possession by Baron Samedi and attempted to free him with voodoo rituals. The introduction of martial law interrupted cooperation with his compatriots from Haiti. Following the fall of communism, there is some interest in Poland for this small community so far away. The government and various civil society associations have tried to restore ties between the Polonés and Poland, with cultural projects such as Polacy na Haiti (Poles in Haiti) or others more focused on humanitarian aid such as the Fundacja Polska-Haiti.

As noted by Riccardo Orizio in *Lost White Tribes*, in Cazale, which is about 45 miles (72km) from Port-au-Prince, there are still today some Haitians who refer to their Polish ancestry. Although there are other villages too, Cazale is still considered the principal centre for the ethnic Polish community in Haiti. One of the most revered Polish religious symbols is the icon known as the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, and it is thought to have been absorbed by Haitian voodoo. The image of a black Virgin Mary holding the dark-skinned infant Jesus is said to have shaped the vision of one of the Haitian Loa spirits. Polish soldiers likely brought her image to Saint-Domingue. To this day, Polish Haitians are mixed race and often have European features such as blonde or lighter, straighter hair, light eyes and distinct facial characteristics.

The community does not own any books, documents or photos from the past. Some customs have been preserved in rudimentary forms, such as a dance called polka, or plaiting braids in the Slavic way, unknown in the Caribbean. There are also sayings like 'Lá-bas en Pologne' ('There in Poland'), 'M-ap Fe Krakow' ('I do as in Krakow', ie very neatly), or 'Chajé kou Lapologn' ('Charge like the Polish', ie in large numbers).

The Battle of Hohenlinden saw the Polish Danube Legion help defeat the Austrian Army

Images: Alamy, Getty

Heroes of the Medal of Honor

SAMUEL I PARKER

At the Battle of Soissons, in July 1918, though badly wounded this lieutenant colonel led his command in silencing German machine guns, becoming the most highly decorated US infantryman of WWI

WORDS **MICHAEL E HASKEW**

The enemy fire was ferocious, but the attack of the combined 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the US 28th Infantry Regiment had made its way forward in the oppressive heat of 18 July 1918. Second Lieutenant Samuel I Parker, commanding one of the weary platoons that had been fighting for hours, surveyed the situation.

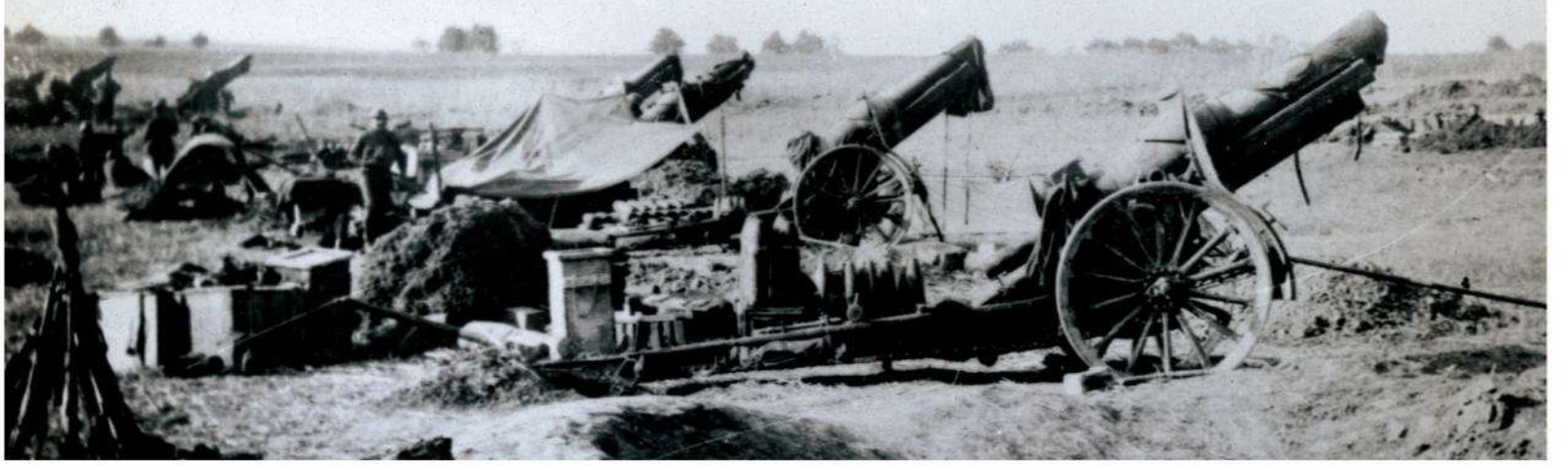
Parker realised that his newly established line was in a precarious position. While the front had been stabilised, at least for the moment, he could see little of the activity on the regiment's left flank. Just then, several German machine guns began to chatter; bullets ripped into the ground, shattered tree branches and cut down several of his soldiers. The 26-year-old officer responded instinctively.

Scanning the countryside, Parker located the source of the concentrated fire, beyond the slope of a nearby hill and apparently covered by enemy infantrymen actively working their bolt-action Mauser rifles. Despite the torrent of bullets they faced, Parker ordered his men forward, toward the crest of the hill. Along the way, he noticed a group of French colonial soldiers, apparently leaderless and wandering about the battlefield. Somehow, he overcame the language barrier and convinced these troops to join his push forward.

Within minutes, the combined effort had gained the crest of the hill, but Parker was not finished. With a rush, his soldiers silenced six German machine guns concealed in a rock quarry that had unleashed the terrific enfilading fire on his previously exposed position. Along with the machine guns, Parker's command bagged 40 prisoners. It had been an exhausting day, one of near-misses, narrow escapes and raw courage.

Parker's heroism occurred during the Battle of Soissons, a five-day engagement that helped seal the fate of the German Army's spring offensive of 1918, the last year of the First World War. The United States had declared war on Imperial Germany in April 1917 in response to provocations from the government of Kaiser Wilhelm II, including its approval of unrestricted submarine warfare in the Atlantic Ocean and an overture of alliance with Mexico (the notorious Zimmermann Note). News of America's entry into the war forced the hand of the German high command. Its senior officers, including Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich

An American battery of heavy artillery guns occupies formerly enemy territory just south of Soissons



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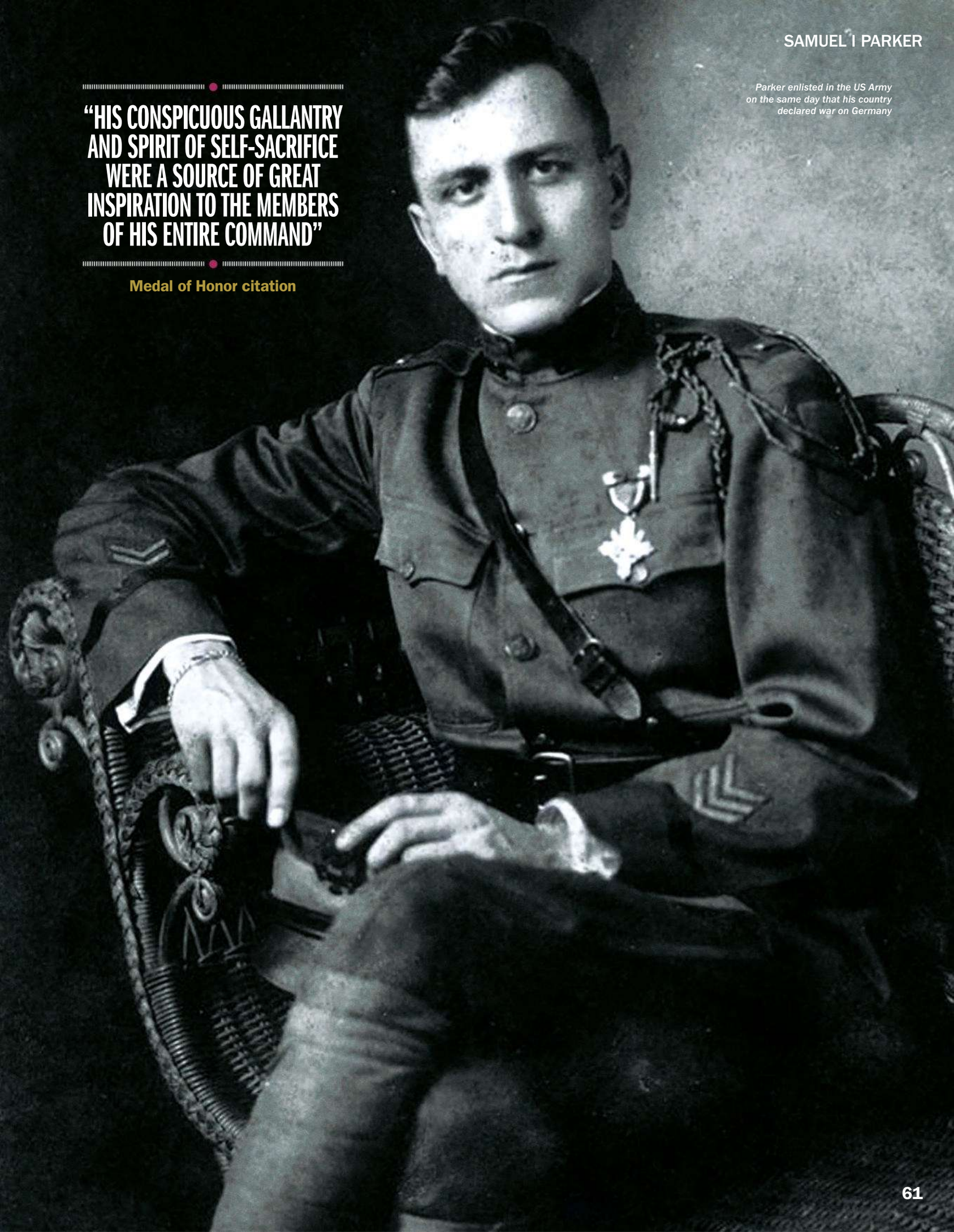


Parker enlisted in the US Army on the same day that his country declared war on Germany

"HIS CONSPICUOUS GALLANTRY AND SPIRIT OF SELF-SACRIFICE WERE A SOURCE OF GREAT INSPIRATION TO THE MEMBERS OF HIS ENTIRE COMMAND"

Medal of Honor citation

Ludendorff, realised the US would eventually bring industrial might and manpower into the war that Germany could not match.

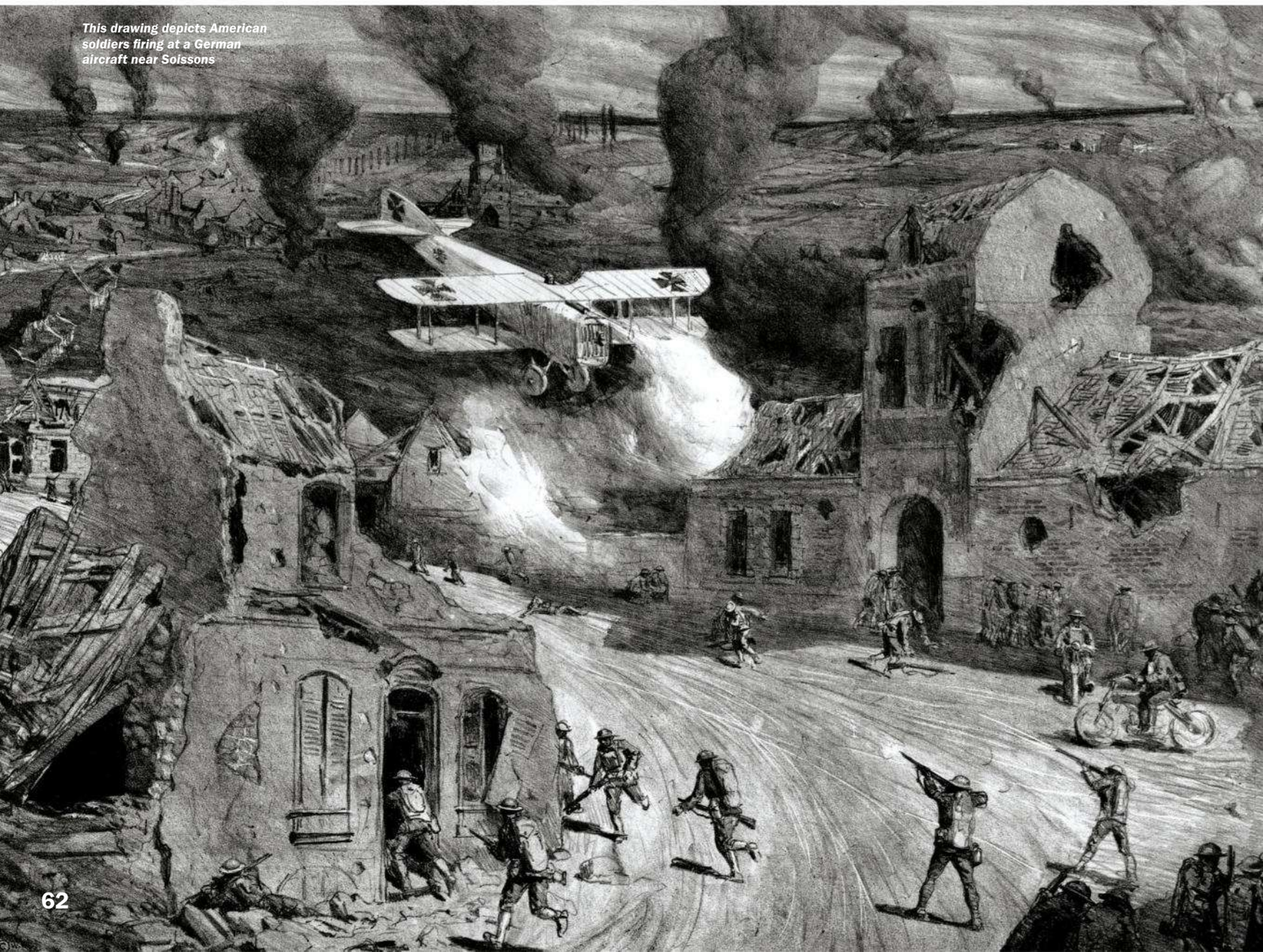
Time was of the essence and the spring offensive was the last, best hope for a German victory before American resources could be brought to bear in Europe in overwhelming numbers. The spring offensive had initially made good progress, but in one area along the banks of the River Marne, the German advance had reached beyond the remainder of the front line, developing a sizable salient. In response to the German attacks the Allies, principally Britain, France and the US, launched the Aisne-Marne counteroffensive.

Parker had enlisted in the army in his hometown of Monroe, North Carolina, in April 1917, on the very day that the United States declared war. Three months later, his Company K had been among the first American troops to arrive in France, on 29 June 1917. In time, the trickle of US troops became a torrent. However, there was training to be completed and equipment to be issued before the Americans were committed to the front. By the following spring, the 1st Infantry Division had been deployed to support the exhausted French 1st Army. On 28 May 1918, the 28th Regiment assaulted the town of Cantigny. The fight lasted just 45 minutes, and in the first American victory of the war the attackers took 250 prisoners, earning the nickname of the Black Lions of Cantigny.

American soldiers dig in near the French village of Soissons in the summer of 1918

Weeks later at Soissons, the objectives of the Allied effort were to cut the road and rail supply routes running north to south from Soissons to the village of Chateau-Thierry and force the Germans to either surrender or pull out of the salient. On 18 July, elements of the French 153rd Division had failed to move forward during Parker's gallant advance, leaving a vulnerable gap in the Allied line. Parker's initiative had not only saved his platoon from further casualties but may well have prevented a devastating German counter-thrust through the gap.

The following day, with numerous American officers killed or wounded in earlier fighting, Parker took command of the combined 2nd and 3rd Battalions. Even though a German bullet had ripped into his foot, causing a painful wound, he refused to be evacuated, intent on leading his men as the fighting resumed. The 1st Battalion, 28th Regiment stepped off with Parker's combined battalion in support. The 1st Battalion quickly drew heavy machine-gun fire, and Parker manouevred his own command to finally close the gap between the American and French troops. He remained in harm's way until the line of the 28th Infantry Regiment was fully stabilised, crawling from place to place on his hands and knees while offering encouragement to his men and delivering orders. Miraculously, he avoided the hail of enemy small-arms fire and remained conscious despite his wound.



This drawing depicts American soldiers firing at a German aircraft near Soissons

Parker receives the Medal of Honor from President Franklin D Roosevelt 18 years after his heroism in WWI

Parker's conspicuous bravery and command presence on 18-19 July 1918 were noted by those around him and resulted in his receiving his country's highest award for valour in combat, the Medal of Honor.

After recovering sufficiently, he rejoined his unit and again displayed remarkable heroism and leadership. During heavy combat near the town of Exermont, France, on 5 October 1918, just weeks prior to the armistice that ended the First World War, he was in the midst of the fighting. His bravery that day earned his country's second-highest award for courage under fire, the Distinguished Service Cross.

The citation reads: "With total disregard for his own personal danger, Lieutenant Parker advanced directly on a machine gun 150 yards away while the enemy were firing directly at him and killed the gunner with his pistol. In the town of Exermont his platoon was almost surrounded after having taken several prisoners and inflicting heavy losses on the enemy; but despite the fact that only a few men of the platoon were left, continued to fight until other troops came to their aid."

For further heroism, Parker also received the US military's third-highest decoration for bravery in combat, the Silver Star. The addition of an oak leaf cluster to it denoted two such occurrences. He also received the Purple Heart with oak leaf cluster for two wounds sustained while fighting the Germans. In further recognition of his valour, Parker was awarded the French Croix de Guerre.

"IT IS OUR DUTY TO REMEMBER THE SERVICE AND SACRIFICE OF LIEUTENANT COLONEL SAMUEL I PARKER AND THAT OF ALL OUR VETERANS"

Congressman Robin Hayes to the US House of Representatives, 2006

Parker survived many harrowing days of combat, emerging as the most highly decorated US soldier of the Great War. However, that distinction did not belong to the heroic officer until 7 May 1936, when he received the Medal of Honor from President Franklin D Roosevelt at the White House in Washington, DC. Roosevelt presented the medal in the Oval Office with members of the Parker family and Army Chief of Staff Major General Malin H Craig among those present. The ceremony occurred 18 years after Parker's heroic deeds, and the reason for the delay was perhaps bound up in lost paperwork, an administrative mishandling or some other unfortunate circumstance.

Parker was promoted to first lieutenant and served with the Allied occupation forces in Germany after hostilities ceased in 1918. He returned to the US and was discharged from active military service on 25 September 1919. He joined the Army Reserve and reentered civilian life, working in the textile mills of North Carolina, not far from his hometown. During the Second World War, he was recalled to active duty and became involved with the training of soldiers at Fort Benning, Georgia. He taught an officer training course, wrote an infantry textbook titled *Combat Leadership*, and rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel. His other military awards include the Legion of Merit, World War I and World War II Victory Medals, World War II American Campaign Medal and unit recognition earned by the 28th Infantry Regiment.

Samuel Parker, known as Si to his family and friends, retired from the US Army in 1945 and returned to work in the textile industry. He went on to serve as vice president of the National Council on Leadership and as the secretary-treasurer of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society. He passed away at Walter Reed Army Medical Center on 1 December 1975 at the age of 84. On Veterans Day, 11 November 2021, a monument commemorating his gallantry in the service of his country was dedicated at Oakwood Cemetery in Concord, North Carolina, where he rests.

Images: Wiki / PD / Gov

TEUTOBURG FOREST

ANCIENT ROME'S DARKEST HOUR

How a Roman citizen lured three of the empire's legions into a deadly trap

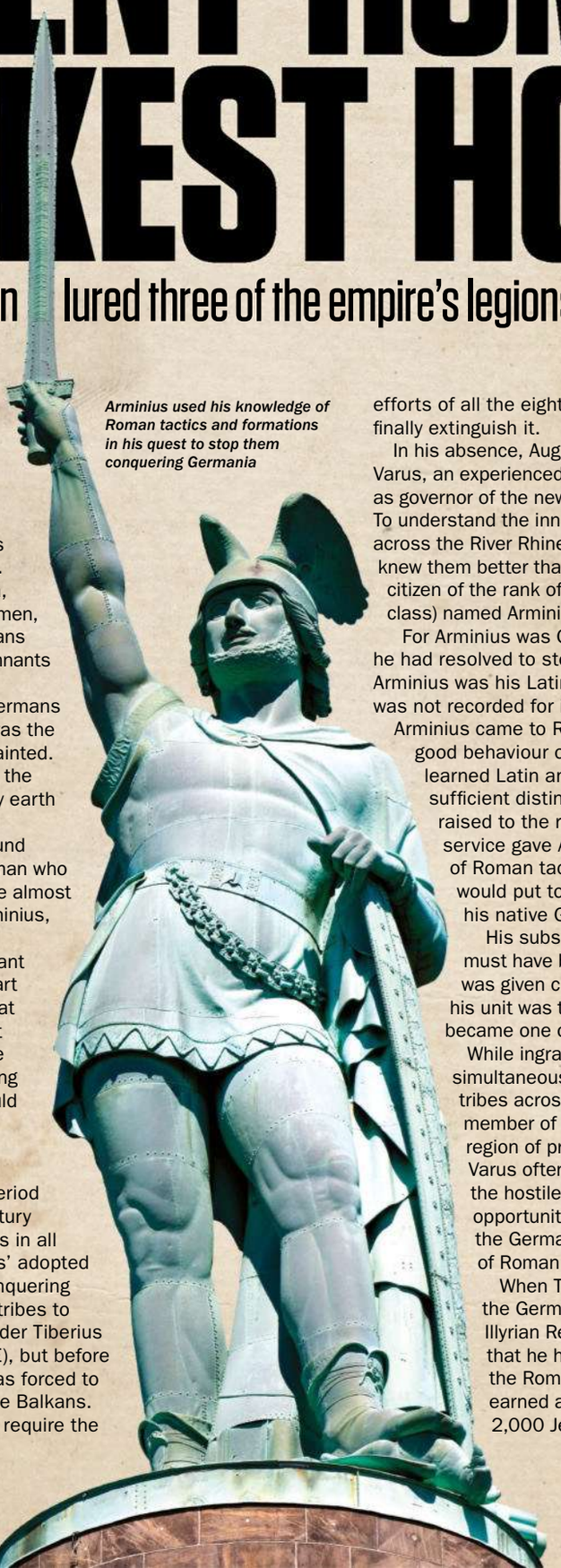
WORDS **EDOARDO ALBERT**

It was over. As Publius Quinctilius Varus, commander of the XVII, XVIII and XIX legions, looked at the carnage surrounding him, he knew all hope was lost. For three days they had tried to fight their way to safety, through appalling conditions of mud and rain, while the Germans harassed and assaulted his retreating legions. The commander of the cavalry, Numonius Vala, had abandoned them with the surviving horsemen, trying to ride to safety. Now the native barbarians were amassing for the final assault on the remnants still under Varus' command.

Publius Quinctilius Varus knew what the Germans did with men they captured in battle. But it was the disgrace that was worse. His name forever tainted. As the screams and battle cries drew closer, the general fixed his sword point up in the muddy earth and fell upon it.

When the battle was over, the Germans found Varus' body, impaled by his own sword. The man who had masterminded the plan that had seen the almost total destruction of three Roman legions, Arminius, commanded that Varus's head be cut off and sent as a gift to the leader of the only important German tribal federation not to have taken part in the battle. The head was a message of what Arminius had achieved and a promise of what they could do as allies. Its refusal marked the limits of Arminius's extraordinary victory among his German rivals. But for the Romans, it would outline the limits of an empire that they had previously believed would expand forever.

It was not supposed to be like this. Under Augustus, the Roman state had enjoyed a period of unprecedented internal peace after a century of civil wars while also expanding its frontiers in all directions. Between 12 and 9 BCE, Augustus' adopted son, Drusus, had pushed into Germania, conquering swathes of territory and subjecting German tribes to Roman rule. Roman expansion continued under Tiberius (the brother of Drusus, who had died in 9 CE), but before he could complete the conquest, Tiberius was forced to march south to deal with a major revolt in the Balkans. The revolt lasted for four years, and it would require the efforts of all the eight legions Tiberius took with him to finally extinguish it.



Arminius used his knowledge of Roman tactics and formations in his quest to stop them conquering Germania

In his absence, Augustus appointed Publius Quinctilius Varus, an experienced, not to say brutal, administrator as governor of the new imperial province of Germania. To understand the inner workings of the German tribes across the River Rhine, Varus turned to a man who knew them better than any other: a young Roman citizen of the rank of equites (just below the senatorial class) named Arminius. It was to prove a fatal mistake.

For Arminius was German and, under his Roman veneer, he had resolved to stop the Romans conquering Germania. Arminius was his Latin name. His original German name was not recorded for it was not needed when the young Arminius came to Rome as a hostage to guarantee the good behaviour of his kinsmen. In Rome, Arminius learned Latin and served in the Roman army with sufficient distinction to be made a citizen and to be raised to the rank of equites. His Roman military service gave Arminius a thorough understanding of Roman tactics and formations, a knowledge he would put to devastating use when he returned to his native Germania.

His subsequent deeds indicate that Arminius must have been a highly effective commander. He was given charge of a unit of auxiliaries and, when his unit was transferred to Germania, he quickly became one of Varus' most trusted advisers.

While ingratiating himself with Varus, Arminius simultaneously made contact with the Germanic tribes across the Rhine. He himself was a member of the Cherusci tribe who lived in the region of present-day Hanover and, as such, Varus often employed him as a messenger to the hostile tribes. This gave Arminius the perfect opportunity to form and cement an alliance of the Germanic tribes while gathering intelligence of Roman intentions.

When Tiberius stripped eight legions from the German frontier to help put down the Great Illyrian Revolt in the Balkans, Arminius saw that he had the perfect opportunity to strike at the Romans. As governor of Syria, Varus had earned a reputation for brutality, crucifying 2,000 Jewish rebels. Varus no doubt pursued

Arminius became a key figure of 19th-century German nationalism. He was given the more Germanic name of Herman

"WHEN THE BATTLE WAS OVER, THE GERMANS FOUND VARUS' BODY, IMPALED BY HIS OWN SWORD"

“THEIR LOSSES WERE MOUNTING AND, ON THE FINAL DAY, THEY ENTERED THE LAST KILLING ZONE THAT ARMINIUS HAD PREPARED FOR THEM”

the same harsh path in Germania, making it easier for Arminius to unite the usually warring and suspicious tribes under his secret leadership.

With the tribes onside, the final strand of Arminius’ plan was to lure the Romans into a battle in a place of his own choosing. Having fought alongside the Romans many times, Arminius was well aware that in open ground the disciplined legions would cut down the waves of German warriors like a military threshing machine. To have any chance of victory, he had to ensure the Romans were forced to fight in the sort of terrain that made it all but impossible for them to adopt their battlefield formations.

So when Arminius came to Varus with reports that the Bructeri tribe in northwest Germania had revolted, he had in mind exactly where he would bring the Romans to battle. Such was Varus’ faith in his Latinised auxiliary commander that he ignored the warning of another German chief, Segestes, that he was being led into a trap. Varus dismissed the warning as sour grapes on the part of Segestes and set off into Germania to put down the Bructeri, taking the route that Arminius suggested.

While an experienced governor, Varus had less experience of military command. To ensure the success of his mission, he took all three legions under his command; the XVII, XVIII and XIX, some 20,000 legionaries, auxiliaries and associated camp followers.

It was early September but the weather was atrocious: heavy rain soaked the marching army, turning the earth beneath their feet into a quagmire. At the end of the first day’s march, Arminius requested permission from Varus to summon German allies to join the expedition. Arminius had carefully seeded the belief in Varus that many of the German tribes were willing to fight alongside the Romans. Varus, his belief in Arminius’ loyalty unshaken, gave him permission and the German rode away with his men. Although he did not know it yet, Varus had sealed his fate and the fate of the men he was leading deep into the dense German forest.

As was their practice, the Roman forces threw up a camp in which to pass the night. Unknown to them, Arminius and his men were busy preparing the trap that they would march into on the morrow.

The path the Romans took the next day was narrow, threading through thick forest with a hill rising on one flank and a bog on the other. The legions had no choice but to spread out along the trail so that the column straggled through the forest. The line of Romans extended for at least nine miles (15km) through the trees. Unknown to Varus, Arminius had built fortifications along the hill beside which the Romans were marching. At his signal, the Germans launched their assault. With the legions spread out, the ground wet and muddy, and Arminius probing at different points along the column throughout the day, Varus was unable to regroup his forces into any sort of fighting formation. Local struggles continued throughout the day. Whenever a group of legionaries attempted to launch a counterattack, the Germans retreated behind their fortifications.

Only nightfall brought an end to the carnage. The surviving legionaries erected a night camp behind fortifications while the Germans retired and waited for first light. Knowing

A depiction of the victorious Germans after the Battle of Teutoburg Forest

their only salvation lay in making it back to Roman territory, Varus ordered a break out the next morning. The surviving legionaries managed to punch through the German blockade but at the cost of further casualties. With the Germans continuing to harry them, the Romans marched on, even attempting a night march in their efforts to escape the trap that Arminius had set. But their losses were mounting and, on the final day, they entered the last killing zone that Arminius had prepared for them.

In the shadow of Kalkriese Hill, with an impassable bog preventing escape to the flank, the Romans found a trench cutting across their line of march and an earthwork flanking them from which the Germans continued to hurl missiles and spears. The Romans made a desperate attempt to storm the earthwork but were pushed back. Numonius Vala, the cavalry commander, attempted to escape with his surviving cavalrymen, to no avail; he was pursued and killed. This was when Publius Quinctilius Varus realised that all hope was gone. Rather than risk being taken captive, he committed suicide. Many other officers did likewise. Abandoned by their commanders, the surviving legionaries fought on, but without direction they were surrounded and picked off. Of the 20,000 men that Varus took into the forest, only a handful escaped. The rest were killed, either during the battle or sacrificed to the tribal gods afterwards.

When news of the disaster reached Augustus in Rome, he was so upset that he hit his head against a wall, shouting, "Quintili Vare, legiones redde!" (Quintilius Varus, give me back my legions!). It was a momentous victory. The empire that had no bounds had hit its limit: the Rhine would form its frontier for the rest of its existence. As for the man behind this stunning victory, Arminius would be assassinated ten years later by political rivals.

The exact location of the battle remained disputed for centuries until 1987, when Major Tony Clunn, stationed in Osnabrück with the Royal Tank Regiment, decided to go searching with his metal detector. An amateur archaeologist, and through his military training well versed in spotting likely lines of march, Clunn set out to investigate the area under Kalkriese Hill. His metal detector soon started pinging. Digging beneath the soil, Major Clunn found a Roman denarius bearing the portrait of Augustus. He quickly found more coins, all dating from the reign of Augustus. Clunn marked the exact locations of his discoveries. There was only one likely reason for so many Augustan-era Roman coins to be scattered around on the slopes of Kalkriese Hill. Soon, professional archaeologists followed, undertaking systematic investigations that revealed the debris of battle along a 15-mile (24km) corridor running east to west.

Archaeological finds included traces of the wall that Arminius had built to contain and channel the Roman legions. Lots of debris was found in front of the wall, almost none behind it. The Romans had attempted to break through but been driven back, leaving traces of their doomed expedition in the ground for two millennia until the attention of an amateur archaeologist brought them to the surface and allowed them to trace the course of one of the most important battles in history through the landscape in which it occurred.

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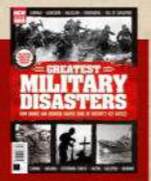
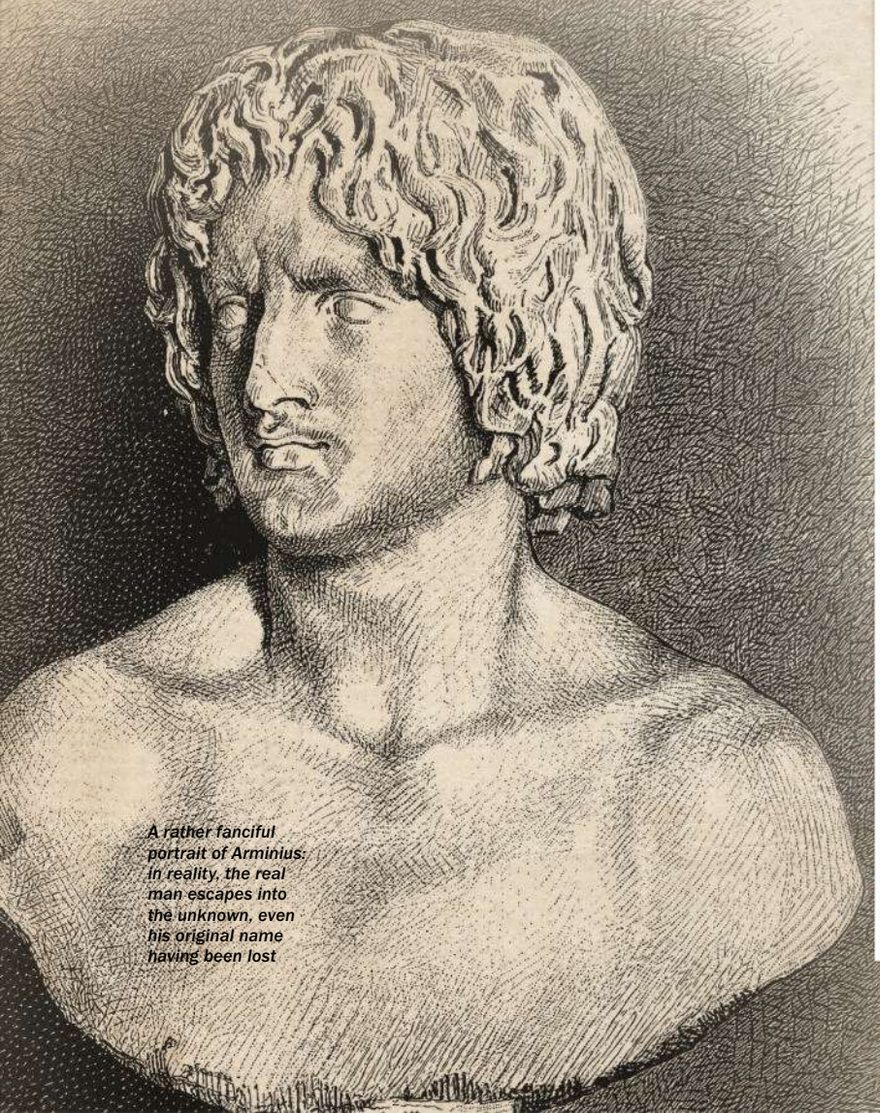




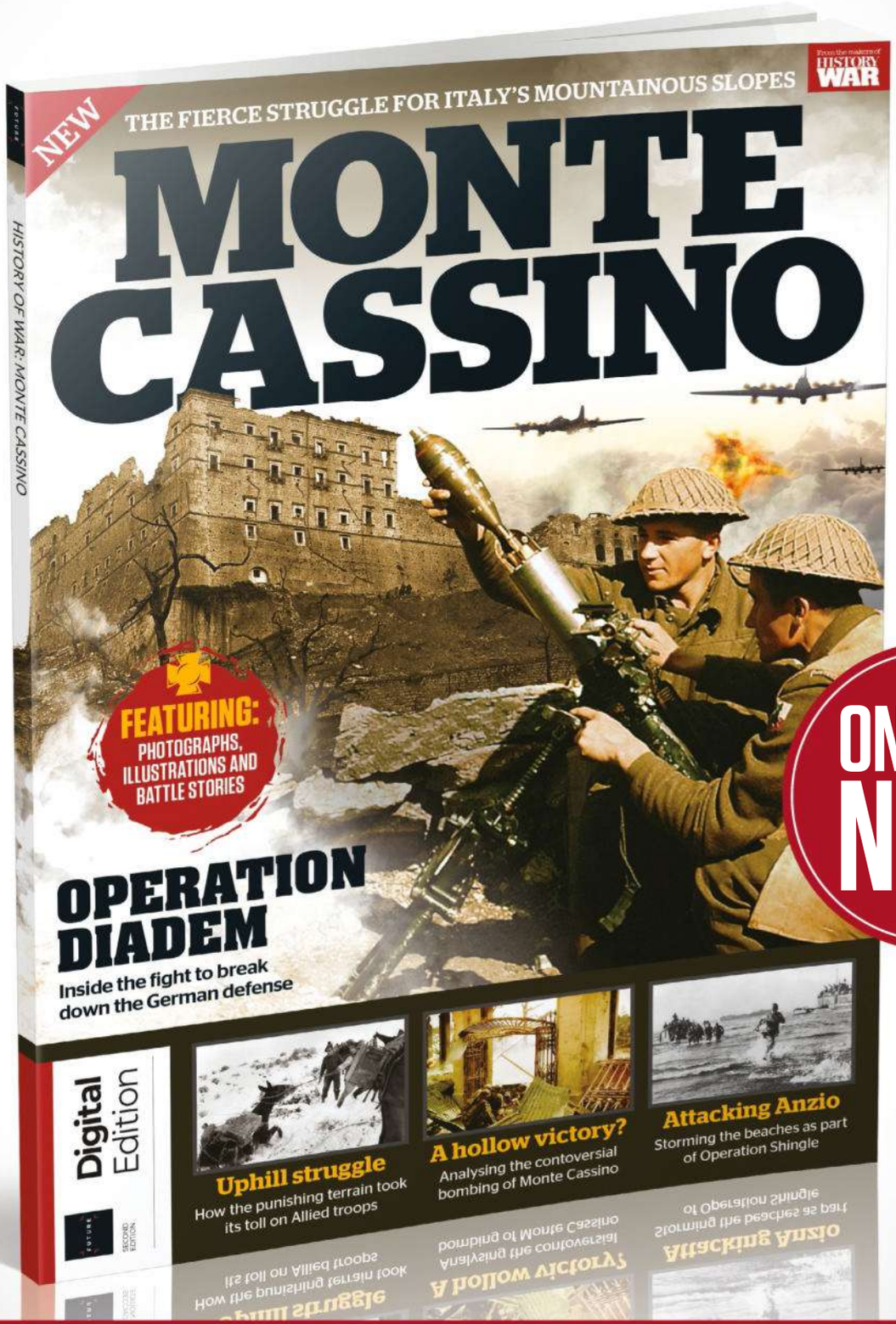
A rather fanciful portrait of Arminius: in reality, the real man escapes into the unknown, even his original name having been lost

Some of the Roman coins that enabled archaeologists to chart the course of the ancient battle

Images: Alamy, Getty

THE FIERCE STRUGGLE FOR ITALY'S MOUNTAINOUS SLOPES

Explore this complete guide to the Battle of Monte Cassino, one of World War II's bloodiest battles, from the Anzio beach assault to the controversial Allied bombing campaign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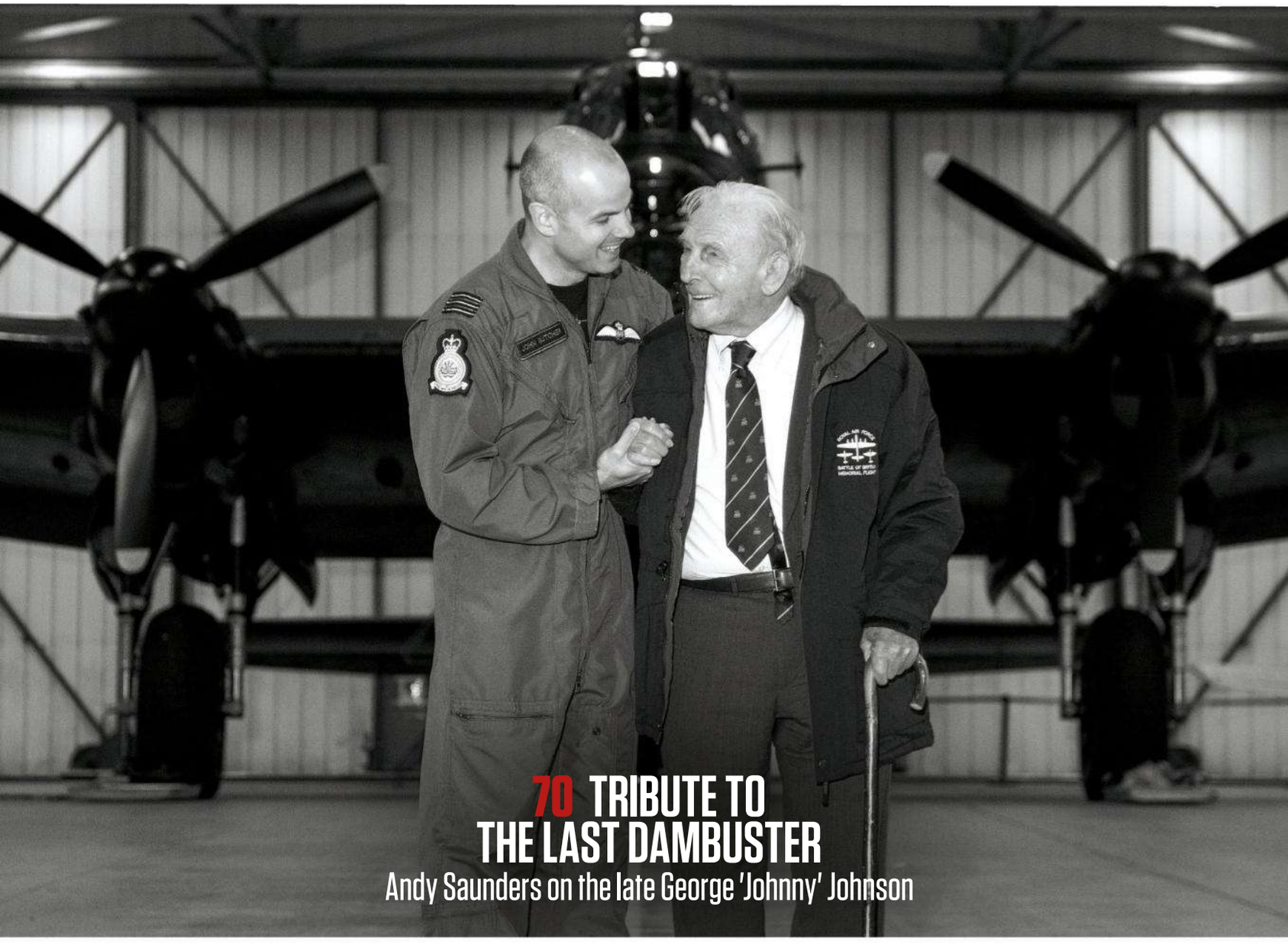

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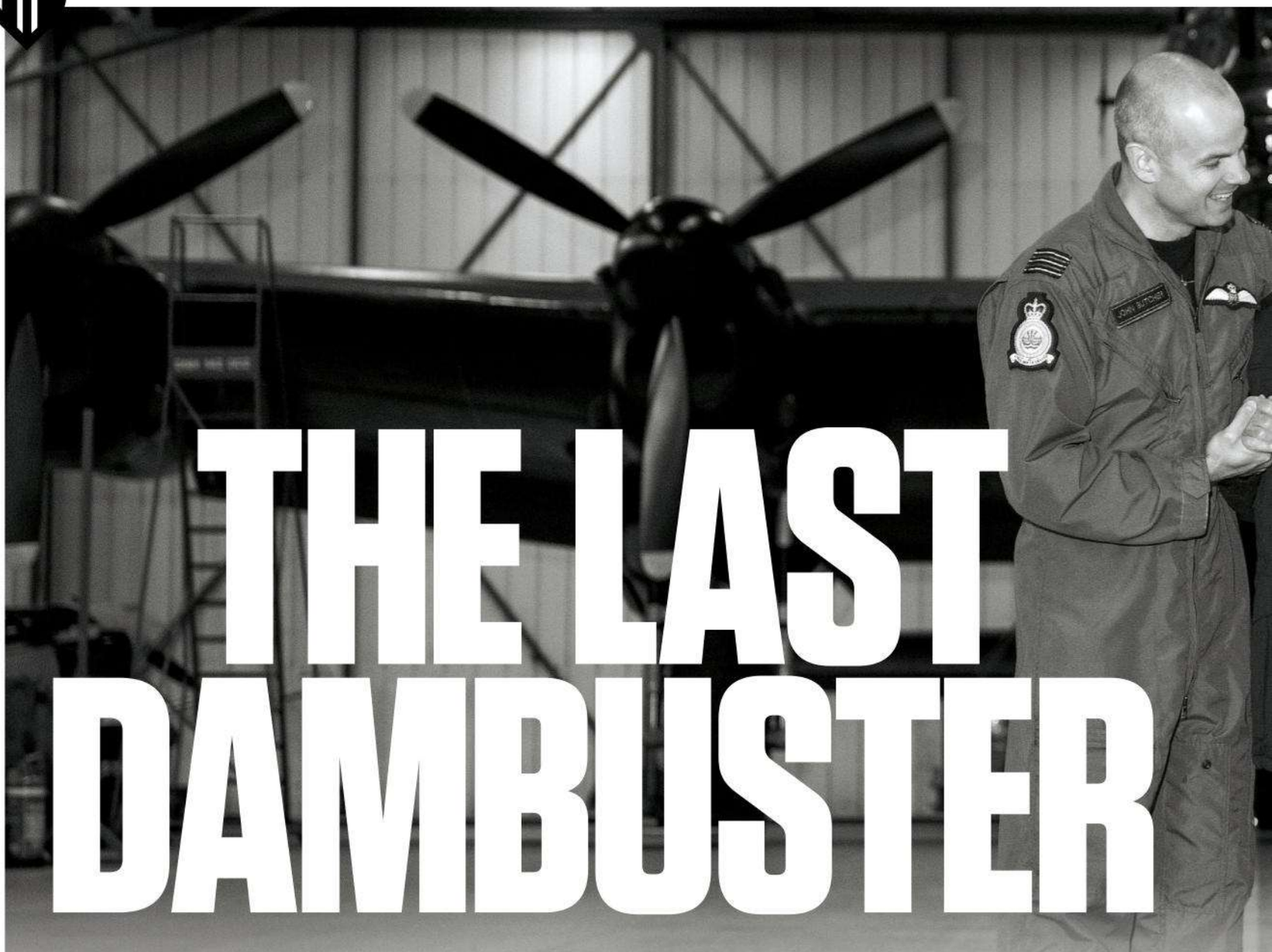


THE LAST DAMBUSTER

WORDS **ANDY SAUNDERS**

Aviation historian and consultant Andy Saunders pays tribute to George 'Johnny' Johnson, who passed away in 2022 just short of the 80th anniversary of Operation Chastise

As we edge ever further into the 21st century, it is inevitable that our tangible connections to the Second World War slip away from us with the passing of the last remaining veterans of that conflict. They are now mostly centenarians, and we are fast approaching a time when that living connection will be gone forever. On a depressingly regular basis we see obituaries of veterans of the war, with one of the more notable recent losses being that of George 'Johnny' Johnson, the last living 'Dambuster', the poignancy of his passing undoubtedly heightened by the imminent approach of the 80th anniversary of 617 Squadron's dams raid. That anniversary will also see the release of *Attack on Sorpe Dam*, a spectacular documentary featuring the story of Johnson and his crew in what is arguably their largely overlooked raid on the Sorpe Dam. The film is scheduled for its premiere in Johnson's adopted hometown of Bristol.

During the later years of his life, Johnson penned his autobiography *The Last British Dambuster*, a remarkable work that was first published in 2014. It was not until that book was written that we really knew the intricate and inside story of exactly how the attack on the Sorpe Dam worked – both from the human as well as its technical aspects. And it was certainly a very different operation in terms of the methodology adopted for the attacks on the Möhne Dam and Eder Dam.

In leaving us his story, part of Johnson's legacy for future generations are the valuable insights into not only the mindset of the aircrews of 617 Squadron but also the job of the all-important bomb-aimers on that famous operation. It was also a story that Johnson regularly gave to captivated audiences in his *In Conversation with Johnny Johnson* events in aid of the Royal British Legion during the later years of his life. The author of this article was privileged to get to know Johnson well during the last ten years of his life, often sharing lunch with him or chatting about life in 617 Squadron over his favourite single malt. It was impossible not to be captivated by his personal story of the raid – however many times he told it. It was certainly an extraordinary tale.

Awesome courage

It was only on the tenth run-in to the dam that bomb-aimer Sergeant Johnson was satisfied that he could hit the target. The previous nine hazardous approaches had all been aborted, and Johnson now realised he was the most unpopular member of the crew. Only on his word would the bomb be dropped, enabling

Johnson shares a joke with Wing Commander John Butcher, commanding officer of 617 Squadron, at RAF Coningsby

***Below:** In 2017 Johnson was awarded an MBE for his services to WWII remembrance and the Bristol community*

"ALTHOUGH THEY DIDN'T KNOW IT THEN, JOHNSON AND HIS CREW MATES HAD JUST TAKEN PART IN WHAT MANY CONSIDER THE MOST HISTORIC BOMBING RAID IN HISTORY: OPERATION CHASTISE"

the crew to turn for home. Meanwhile, his American pilot, Joe McCarthy, was throwing the huge bomber around the sky as if it were a fighter, while following Johnson's instructions. And all of this was in the dark, sometimes at little more than 30ft (9m).

Articulating the crew's discomfort, rear gunner David Rodger grumbled into the intercom: "Will somebody please get that bloody bomb out of here?"

Finally, Johnson jabbed the bomb-release button and the Lancaster bucked upwards, relieved of its enormous load.

Now, from the rear turret, Rodgers exclaimed: "God almighty! Jesus! That spray has come right into the turret. I've been thrown all over the place by you blighters and now you're trying to drown me!"

Although they didn't know it then, Johnson and his crew mates had just taken part in what many consider the most historic bombing raid in history: Operation Chastise. It was an attack that cost the lives of 53 members of 617 Squadron on that momentous night in May 1943.

Surviving what was a technically brilliant and awesomely courageous venture, Johnson's enduring memory of Operation Chastise was the sight of empty chairs at breakfast the following morning – 53 men had been killed – something seared indelibly into his mind's eye. And it was something he thought about regularly. In 2022, however, Johnson, the last Dambuster, passed away at the age of 101.

The story of the Dambusters is, of course, universally well-known. It is a story made famous by Paul Brickhill's 1951 book *The Dam Busters*, which was later immortalised by the popular 1955 film of the same name in which Richard Todd plays the young, enigmatic and almost swashbuckling commander of 617 Squadron, Wing Commander Guy Gibson.

Of Gibson, Johnson was less than effusive and candidly admitted that he did not greatly care for him as a person. On the other hand, Johnson was double-quick to counter any negativity about Gibson by effusively lauding him as a wonderful commander and leader. After all, as Johnson pointed out, Gibson was astonishingly young, well-decorated, highly experienced and entrusted with leading what was one of the most difficult and dangerous wartime operations ever undertaken by RAF Bomber Command. It was a daring operation into enemy territory that remains very much in the collective British consciousness of the Second World War.

Images: Alamy, Getty

The hardest target

With its dramatic imagery of water cascading through the breached Möhne and Eder dams, it's little wonder that the Dambusters raid is so well remembered. Except Johnson's crew attacked neither the Möhne nor the Eder. Their target, the Sorpe Dam, was all but ignored in both Brickhill's book and the subsequent film. For all of that, however, it was technically the most challenging of the three dams attacked that night. Not only that, but Johnson and his crew had not been specifically trained for the job.

The story of rigorous training is a well-known aspect of the Dambusters story, with the squadron's Lancasters repeatedly flying low-level practice runs against the Derwent Dam, a structure broadly similar to the Möhne and Eder dams with twin towers and high stone walls. However, the Sorpe Dam was neither of those things. Instead, it was a low earthen bank against which Barnes Wallis' famous 'Upkeep' bouncing bomb could not be delivered, head-on, as intended. Instead, the pilots and bomb-aimers had to work out how to deliver the bomb when flying along the dam. For that reason, only the best crews were selected for the Sorpe. And they pretty much had to make it up as they approached the target.

When Johnson finally dropped the bomb, it landed plum on target and blasted a hole in the top of the dam. By any standards, it was an awesome piece of piloting and bomb-aiming. But because there were no torrents of water cascading through breached walls it achieved little publicity and the Sorpe and its attackers became nigh-on 'forgotten', almost just a footnote in the famous raid's narrative. Although the bomb severely damaged the dam and resulted in the lake having to be drained for repair work, it was not breached like the Möhne and Eder. Yet it was certainly the case that the men who attacked the Sorpe were no less brave and supremely skilled – if not more so.

McCarthy eventually greased their Avro Lancaster and its relieved crew back onto the runway at RAF Scampton. They had flown into history. And made history.

For his bravery, Johnson was recognised with the immediate award of a Distinguished Flying Medal and a Buckingham Palace investiture.

A warm, gentle and self-effacing man, Johnson also enjoyed the odd wry joke. Meeting him at one of his speaking events, an airline pilot remarked that he had recently flown over the dams.

"Oh, really?" remarked Johnson. "And what height were you? And was it daylight?"

"About 18,000ft [5,500m] and in daylight, yes," came the reply.

"You should try it at 60ft [18m]. In the dark!" quipped Johnson.

Ever the raconteur, joker and yet modest veteran, Johnson had continued to serve in the RAF until his retirement in 1962 as a squadron leader. Leaving the service, he lived most of his post-war life in contented and relative obscurity with his beloved wife Gwyn (who pre-deceased him). Later becoming a teacher, he first worked in primary schools before moving into adult education, where he taught psychiatric patients at Rampton Hospital in Nottinghamshire before becoming active in local politics.

"BLUSHING, JOHNSON LAUGHED AND EXPLAINED: 'I THINK SHE'S A BIT SWEET ON ME!' ADDING, 'BUT I'M NO HERO'"

For his services to Second World War remembrance and to the community of Bristol, he was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire in the 2017 Birthday Honours and was once again invited to attend Buckingham Palace for its investiture. And a petition to grant him a Knighthood garnered thousands of signatures in just a few weeks, yet it was ultimately not an honour bestowed on him. Talking of this petition, Johnson later said that he felt both astonished and deeply humbled but "wholly unworthy" of such a high honour. His view might not have been one with which many would have agreed.

The following year, however, Johnson was granted further recognition when he was invited to fly in the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight's Lancaster – a privilege that is only very rarely granted to civilians – with the flight arranged to mark the 75th anniversary of the Dambusters raid.

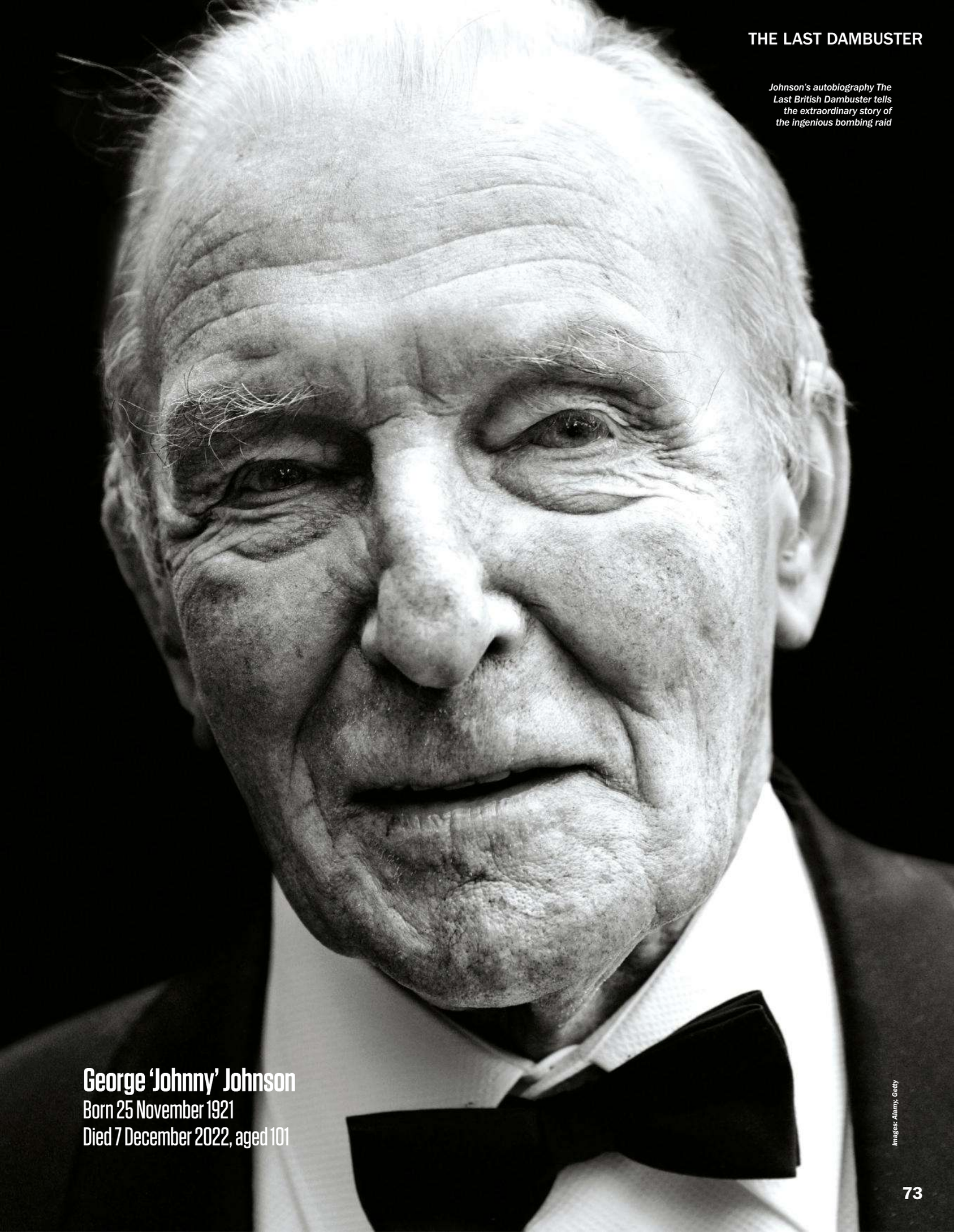
At one meeting in recent years, Johnson generously took the author of this article to lunch in the dining room of his sheltered accommodation in Bristol. Over the meal, an elderly but elegantly glamorous lady – one of his fellow residents – approached the table. In hushed tones, she whispered: "You're having lunch with a real hero!"

Blushing, Johnson laughed and explained: "I think she is a bit sweet on me!" adding, "But I'm no hero."

There is most likely nobody who would agree with Johnson's own summation as to his outstanding personal courage. It is that courage which inspired film-makers to tell his story in the upcoming documentary. And it is singularly fitting that the film will first be seen in his home city. His absence will be sorely felt, but he will surely be there in his uniquely indomitable spirit.

Johnson pictured at RAF Coningsby in May 2018 at an event to mark the raid's 75th anniversary

For more information on the film *Attack On Sorpe Dam*, go to www.attackonsorpedam.com



Johnson's autobiography The Last British Dambuster tells the extraordinary story of the ingenious bombing raid

George 'Johnny' Johnson
Born 25 November 1921
Died 7 December 2022, aged 101

Images: Alamy, Getty

MUSEUMS & EVENTS

Discover Bristol's rich military aviation history, Lincoln Castle's connection with Magna Carta and the WWI museum in Ypres that is dedicated to peace

A two-seat biplane, the Bristol F2 Fighter was one of the most successful British fighter aircraft of WWI, with 5,329 produced

An RAF Bristol Sycamore rescue helicopter in action

The entrance to Aerospace Bristol at Filton

Beaufighters, Blenheims and Sycamores

Containing aircraft from WWI to the early 21st century, Aerospace Bristol commemorates the many military and civil aeroplanes and helicopters that were named after the city

Located six miles (10km) north of Bristol in the town of Filton, Aerospace Bristol is an aviation museum that exhibits both civilian and military aircraft. Situated on Filton Airfield, the museum's main exhibition is housed in a Grade II-listed hangar dating from the First World War. During 1914-18, Filton was the home of the Bristol-based British and Colonial Aeroplane Company. Thousands of Bristol F2 Fighter aircraft were built on the site, with the Royal Flying Corps also having a base there.

From 1929, Filton became an RAF base and was home to 501 (City of Bristol) Squadron that was equipped with Hawker Hurricanes. RAF Filton was heavily bombed by German aircraft on 25 September 1940, which led to a squadron of Supermarine Spitfires being based at the airfield. Despite the damage, aircraft continued to be manufactured at Filton, including Bristol Blenheims, Beauforts and Beaufighters.

During the post-war period, Filton was owned by various aviation companies including the British Aircraft Corporation, British Aerospace and BAE Systems. On 26 November 2003 the last flight of any operational Concorde supersonic airliner occurred at Filton, and the aircraft is now one of the museum's most famous exhibits. Based in the Concorde Hangar, visitors can step aboard this iconic aircraft, and Aerospace Bristol has plenty of military aircraft to see as well.

The museum, which has been open since 2017, contains over 8,000 artefacts. Exhibitions are themed around seven eras of aviation at Filton, two of which focus on the World Wars. Era Two: First World War & Beyond c.1914-1920 shows the impact of the First World War on Filton and features replica Bristol F2 Fighter and Bristol Scout reconnaissance aircraft.

Era Four: World War II c.1935-45 depicts how Filton was affected by the war and features a cutaway section of a Bristol Beaufighter – a night-fighter that flew during the Battle of Britain. Era Five: Bigger, Faster, Further 1945-1960 exhibits a Bristol Bloodhound – a ramjet-powered surface-to-air missile that served as the UK's main air defence weapon during the Cold War. Other displayed surface-to-air missiles include a Sea Dart and Sea Wolf.

A British Aerospace Sea Harrier can be seen at the museum and helicopter enthusiasts can view examples of a Bristol Sycamore and Bristol Type 173. The Sycamore was the first British-designed helicopter to serve in the RAF during the 1950s and the Type 173 was eventually developed into the RAF Bristol Belvedere during the 1960s. Visitors can also closely observe a First World War Bristol F2 Fighter and Second World War Bristol Bolingbroke patrol aircraft being restored by volunteers in the Conservation in Action Workshop.

For more information visit www.aerospacebristol.org

In Flanders Fields

Ypres' WWI experience is told in a poignant museum that is located in the Belgian city's beautiful Cloth Hall

Named after John McCrae's famous poem, the In Flanders Fields Museum is located in the Belgian city of Ypres. During the First World War, Ypres was the centre of five bloody battles between Allied and German forces. These battles saw the first mass use of poison gas in warfare as well as hundreds of thousands of casualties. This included the third battle, better known as Passchendaele, which resulted in perhaps as many as 800,000 casualties.

An ancient city, Ypres was almost completely destroyed during the war, although it was substantially rebuilt. Known as 'Wipers' by British soldiers, Ypres was awarded the Military Cross by King George V in 1920. For British and Dominion veterans, the city symbolically represented what they fought for, with one Canadian officer writing: "There is not a single half-acre in Ypres that is not sacred." It remains a place of military pilgrimage and Ypres is informally known as the 'City of Peace'.

Established in 1998, the In Flanders Field Museum is located in Ypres' reconstructed medieval Cloth Hall. It presents the story of the First World War in the West Flanders region with a message dedicated to peace. Providing a general introduction to the war, the museum also references other nearby military museums such as the Canadian Hill 62 Memorial and the Lange Max Museum. Personal stories from the war are represented by many nationalities with interactive displays, artefacts and exhibits. Visitors can also climb the Cloth Hall's bell tower for views over the city (including the Menin Gate) and surrounding battlefields.

Originally completed in 1304, the Cloth Hall was devastated during WWI but it was meticulously reconstructed to its pre-war condition during 1933-67

For more information visit www.inflandersfields.be

Lincoln Castle

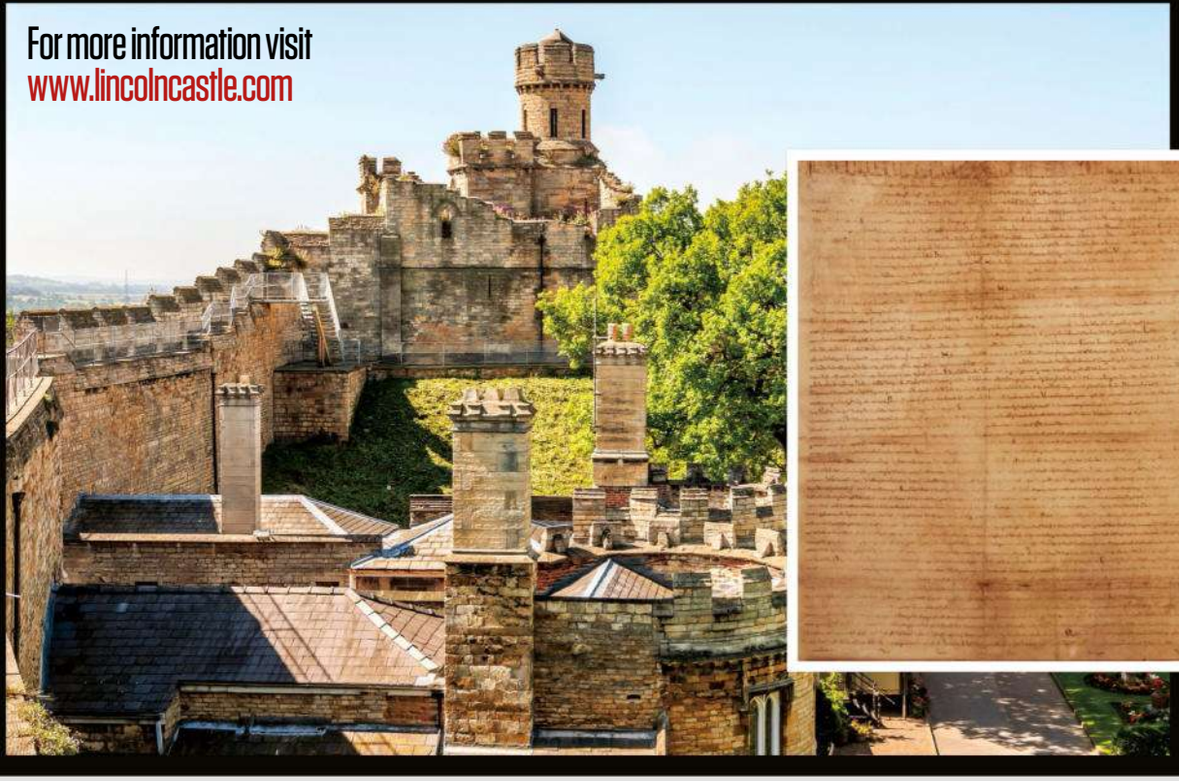
A formidable medieval fortress, Lincoln Castle contains an original copy of Magna Carta

Although it is best known for its magnificent cathedral, Lincoln is also home to a major medieval castle. Constructed by William the Conqueror on the site of a pre-existing Roman fortress, Lincoln Castle has two mottes (raised defensive mounds) – a distinction shared only with Lewes Castle in East Sussex. It was besieged in 1217 before the Battle of Lincoln during the First Barons' War and served for many years as a prison. The castle is so well preserved that it still serves as a Crown Court today.

The First Barons' War was fought shortly after the signing of Magna Carta and Lincoln's significant role during that conflict is remembered at the castle. It is home to an original Magna Carta copy from 1215 as well as a reissued document from 1217 known as a Charter of the Forest. The castle is the only place in the world where an original 1215 Magna Carta and 1217 Charter of the Forest can be seen side by side.

One of the castle's most dramatic features is its vast stone curtain wall. Visitors can walk along the wall's full circumference, which is a third-of-a-mile (0.5km) long. The east wall battlement offers the city's best view of Lincoln Cathedral and there are also views of the surrounding countryside. Visitors can also see exhibitions on the fortress's archaeology as well as the imposing Victorian prison that is located inside the castle.

For more information visit www.lincolncastle.com



The castle's copy of Magna Carta is on loan from Lincoln Cathedral and is only one of four surviving from 1215

***Left:** A view of Lincoln Castle's garden and inner courtyard*

Images: Alamy

REVIEWS

Our pick of the latest military history books and films

CLEAN SWEEP

A THOROUGH OVERVIEW OF VIII FIGHTER COMMAND AND ITS CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE LUFTWAFFE

Author: Thomas McKelvey Cleaver **Publisher:** Osprey Publishing **Price:** £30 **On Sale:** Out now

VIII Fighter Command of the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) was formed in the US in February 1942 and began to move to the UK in May. There, they were to take up a role in escorting the burgeoning offence of VIII Bomber Command, attacking targets across Occupied Europe and Germany. Initially it was a campaign neither force was well suited to. Both were small, inexperienced and feeling their way by trial and error. The fighters at least had the advantage of an experienced core built around the RAF's Eagle Squadrons, transferred to the USAAF and formed into the 4th Fighter Group, and of a small number of pilots with experience in the Far East. However, their equipment was still lacking. Republic P-47 Thunderbolts and Lockheed P-38 Lightnings (the unsung heroes of the air war over Europe) faced a long struggle against technical issues to develop the reliability and range capability to be effective escorts, and the later introduction of the North American P-51 Mustang went through a similar arc.

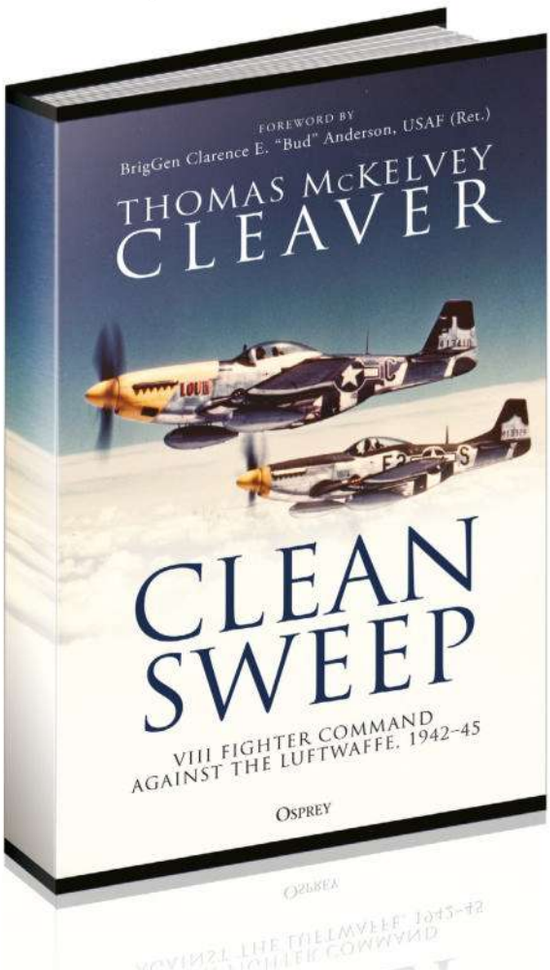
Small numbers and short ranges limited the command's effectiveness for their first 18 months of operations, as of course did the highly experienced German opposition, with correspondingly high casualties among fighters and bombers. Only in early 1944 did the balance begin to tip, with 'Big Week' in February marking the beginning of the end for the Luftwaffe. Even so, a long slog remained ahead and the Luftwaffe continued to fight hard to the very last days of the war, when the VIII Fighter Command found themselves facing the

new technologies of the Messerschmitt Me 163 Komet rocket fighter and Me 262 jet.

Cleaver has established a solid reputation as a historian of the US Navy and US air campaigns. Anyone who has read one of his books before will know what to expect – a detailed but readable story that deftly weaves together the technical, tactical and strategic while always returning to the human angle and personal stories. The development and background of the aircraft and tactics are presented in easily accessible narratives which underpin the development of the campaign and the experiences of the individuals.

The progress of the campaign itself is comprehensively covered, bringing in the stories of and memories from VIII Bomber Command, the IX and XV Air Forces, and the fighter units of the Luftwaffe who opposed them, to give a well-rounded view of events. Dozens of eyewitness accounts underpin the history, ranging from tales of derring-do to insights into the grim realties of the war in the skies over Nazi Europe. There are a few minor errors when describing the British side of the campaign, and it would have been nice to have more of a formal conclusion and summary, but even so this is a first class history of the campaign that was instrumental to Allied victory during the Second World War. As such, it is highly recommended. **SH**

***Left:** VIII Fighter Command planes stationed at RAF Bodney in Norfolk during WWII*



HOW TO FIGHT A WAR

AN EXAMINATION OF HOW TO ORCHESTRATE MILITARY FORCES, FROM INFANTRY AND INFORMATION TO STRATEGY AND TACTICS, IN THE ART OF USING VIOLENCE TO ACHIEVE A GOAL

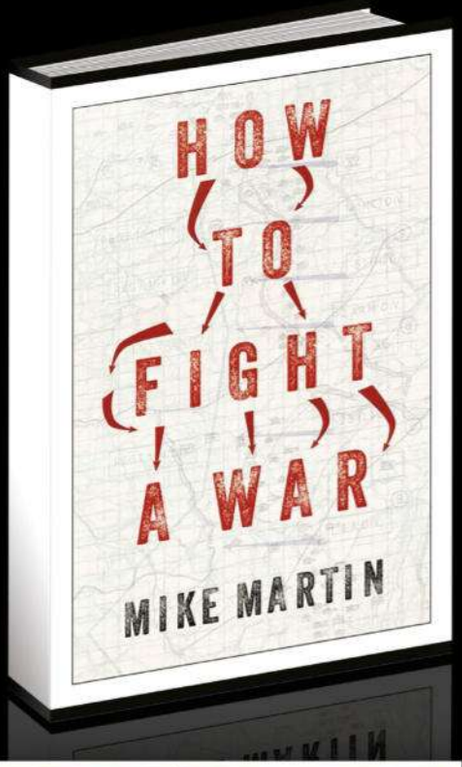
Author: Mike Martin **Publisher:** Hurst **Price:** £22 **On sale:** Out now

Military historian Mike Martin analyses the hard logic behind fighting a conclusive interstate war that resolves geopolitical problems and reduces the risk of future conflict. His narrative outlines how to orchestrate military forces and tools, from infantry and information to strategy and tactics, and his book focuses on the notion that winning wars is essentially understanding and following basic principles.

Martin contends that wars are almost always lost due to the same simple ideas being misapplied or ignored. The first key lesson, the author points out, is that war is political, or politics by other means. This includes key issues like the art of strategy, logistics, morale and training. Coordinating these and other matters underscores the use of lethal violence to achieve political aims.

It is important to understand the strategic goals for engaging in battlefield violence. "Are you seeking to punish an enemy government… and convince the wider world of the just nature of your cause?" the author asks. The belligerent nation may also be seeking to liberate a people from tyranny or defend home territory from invasion. "The precise type of war you are fighting will to some degree set boundaries on how ruthless you are in the application of lethal violence," he says.

Martin also assesses the future impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on warfare. The methods to be employed differ from human decision-making, which largely involves tactics like deception and bluff. AI systems, for the first time in human civilisation, will change the fundamental nature of war. AI will be making the strategic decisions. Advanced militaries are today designing and testing autonomous weapons systems that are much faster at 'thinking' than humans and Martin contends that military leaders need to pay close attention to these experiments. **JS**



New technology, such as the US Navy's Saildrone Explorer unmanned surface vessel, is changing how wars are fought

Images: Alamy, Getty

1923

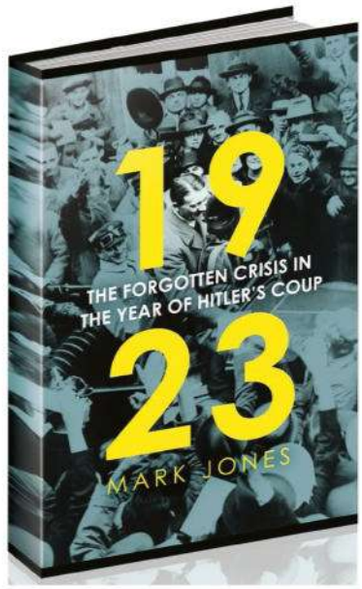
THE FORGOTTEN CRISIS IN THE YEAR OF HITLER'S COUP

A SUPERB DISSECTION OF THE DICTATOR'S FIRST ATTEMPT TO SEIZE POWER

Author: Mark Jones **Publisher:** Basic Books **Price:** £25 **On Sale:** 25 May 2023

There is a popular perception that Adolf Hitler first appeared in 1933 when he became the German chancellor. In reality his rise to dominance commenced a decade earlier when he tried to take power just after Benito Mussolini installed himself in Italy. Mark Jones' latest book looking at 1923 remedies such misconceptions. As he points out, it was actually Hitler's breakthrough year. With a meticulous eye for detail, Jones shows what led to Hitler's November 1923 Munich coup and why it failed. He also illustrates how a series of overlapping crises and tensions in Bavaria, Prussia and the Rhineland created a perfect storm.

The model for Hitler's future dictatorship can be seen in Gustav Ritter von Kahr, who that summer declared a state of emergency in Bavaria and made himself state commissar. Kahr took a dim view of Hitler and his street thugs. Inspired by Mussolini's march on Rome the previous year, Hitler launched the Munich Beer Hall Putsch against Kahr. Hitler was encouraged by support from the highly respected General Erich Ludendorff and many other middle class conservatives.



In the end the police swiftly put paid to Hitler's ambitions and his supporters fled in panic. He narrowly escaped being shot during the brief mayhem and ended up in prison. Crucially, his conservative allies abandoned him, a betrayal he never forgot. As for Kahr, he was murdered by the Nazis in 1934. Written with great verve, this is a fine and welcome analysis of a crucial year in history. **ATJ**

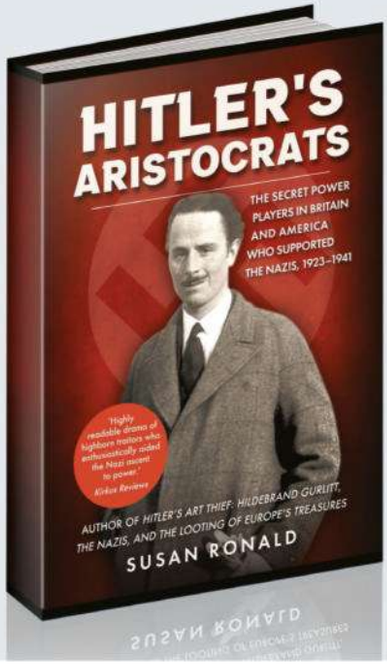
HITLER'S ARISTOCRATS

THE SHADOWY WORLD OF ARISTOCRATS, INDUSTRIALISTS AND POLITICAL ELITE WHO BECAME HITLER'S SUPPORTERS IN THE DRAWING ROOMS, COCKTAIL PARTIES AND WEEKEND RETREATS OF EUROPE AND AMERICA

Author: Susan Ronald **Publisher:** Amberley Publishing **Price:** £25 **Released:** Out now

Given Adolf Hitler's humble origins, there is a grotesque irony in the fact that this son of a small-town Austrian customs official would one day bask in the adulation of some of Europe and America's highest-ranking aristocrats and captains of industry. In *Hitler's Aristocrats*, Susan Ronald explains how hundreds of influencers and enablers actively worked to blind their countries on both sides of the Atlantic to what the dictator and his cohort of criminals were doing.

Some of these collaborators rallied round Hitler as a safeguard against a perceived rise of communism in the wake of the Soviet revolution. Oswald Mosley, founder of the British Union of Fascists, stands out as the most prominent ally of Nazism in the UK. Lesser known was David Freeman-Mitford, father of writer Nancy Mitford, who became one of Hitler's outspoken aristocrats, gong so far as to promote the Führer in the House of Lords.


HITLER'S ARISTOCRATS
THE SECRET POWER PLAYERS IN BRITAIN AND AMERICA WHO SUPPORTED THE NAZIS, 1923–1941
'Highly readable drama of highborn traitors who enthusiastically aided the Nazi ascent to power.' Kirkus Reviews
AUTHOR OF HITLER'S ART THIEF: HILDEBRAND GURLITT, THE NAZIS, AND THE LOOTING OF EUROPE'S TREASURES
SUSAN RONALD

Across the Atlantic, the list of Hitler's admirers was packed with powerful names. Scions of business, from Henry Ford to Thomas J Watson of IBM, were all, according to the author, "in one form or another, paid-up members of the American aristocrats who supported Adolf Hitler".

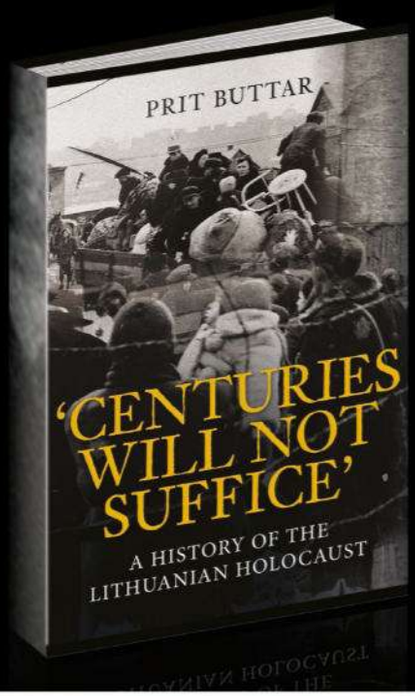
Along with the fear of a Bolshevik-inspired uprising, there was more than a whiff of anti-Semitism fuelling the aristocrats' espousal of Hitler. Henry Ford ranted in newspaper articles against the Jews, quoting passages about conspiracies from the discredited *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. It was a case of mutual admiration: in the early 1930s a large portrait of Ford hung over Hitler's desk in his Munich office.

Ronald's meticulous research brings to light how an influential segment of US and British society defended a dictator whose aim was to crush the democratic traditions of their countries. **JS**

‘CENTURIES WILL NOT SUFFICE’

BRINGING FULL CONTEXT AND UNDERSTANDING TO THE LITHUANIAN HOLOCAUST

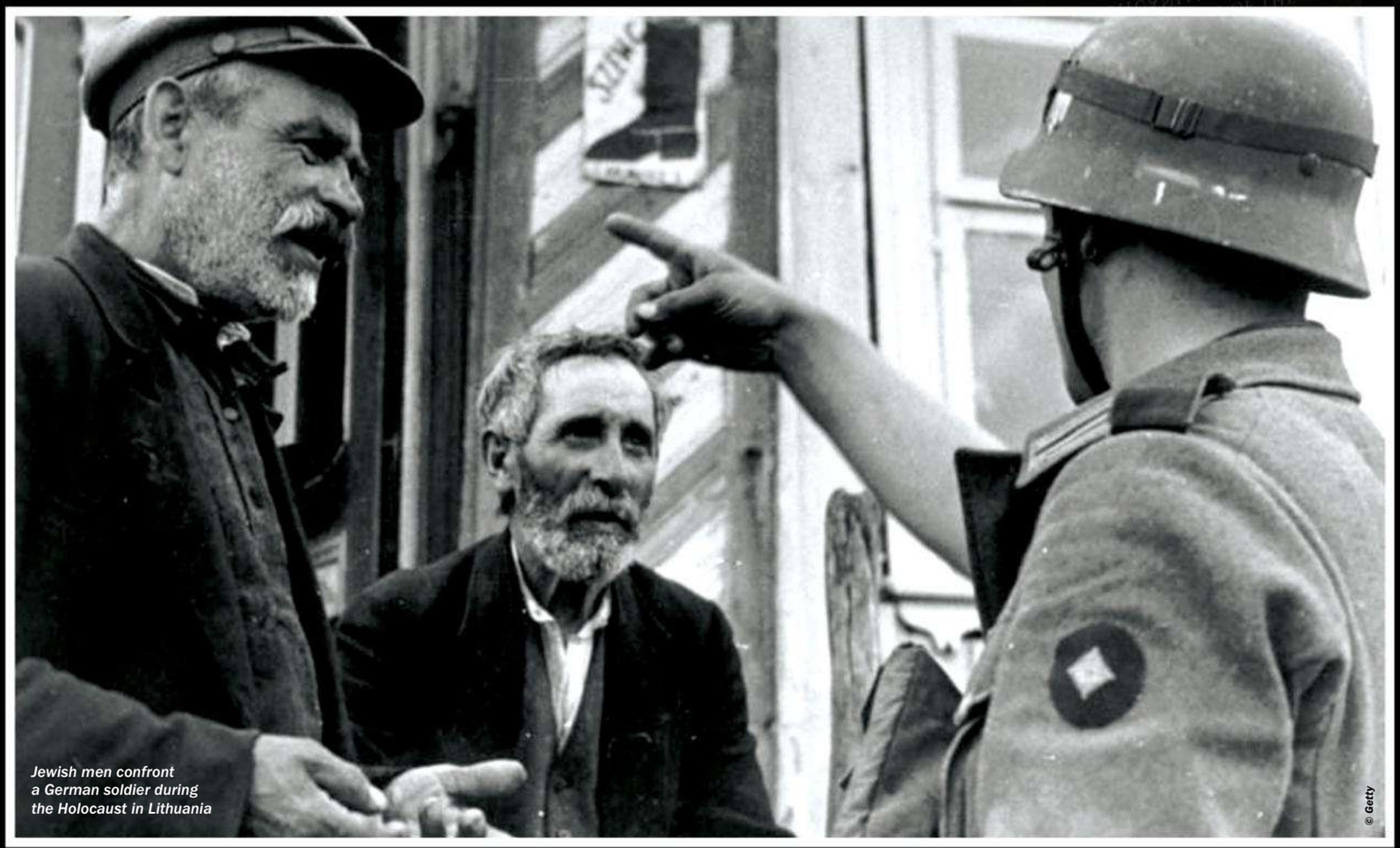
Author: Prit Buttar **Publisher:** Amberley Publishing **Price:** £25 **Released:** Out now



As an author, Prit Buttar has a commendable track record of trudging through the deepest and darkest mud of the Eastern Front of the Second World War to bring its stories to new audiences. These often challenging and desperate tales have too frequently been sidelined in favour of well-trodden tales from the Western Front or big-picture overviews of the powerful figures. As Buttar outlines in his introduction, that big-picture vantage also tends to sum up the human cost in numbers so large that they become difficult to fully absorb, and so here he tries to focus on one area: the Holocaust in Lithuania.

While that target may be contained, there is no lack of context here. Buttar takes us back to the origins of the Nazi’s Einsatzgruppen (meaning task force, but essentially death squads), to the politics at play in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. We even head back into medieval history to learn more about the struggles for independence in Lithuania and the role the Teutonic Knights played. And of course, most importantly, we delve into the backstories of the people who led the execution of Jews in the region. We also learn about some of the heroic people who stood up to these crimes, saving as many as they could, including Japanese and a Dutch diplomat and even a German Army officer who couldn’t abide by what was happening behind the front line. Engaging, potent and informative, this is another excellent work from Buttar. **JG**

“WE DELVE INTO THE BACKSTORIES OF THE PEOPLE WHO LED THE EXECUTION OF JEWS IN THE REGION. WE ALSO LEARN ABOUT SOME OF THE HEROIC PEOPLE WHO STOOD UP TO THESE CRIMES”



Jewish men confront a German soldier during the Holocaust in Lithuania

© Getty

DISCOVER THE STORY OF THE BRUTAL BATTLE FOR NAZI GERMANY'S CAPITAL

With his plans crumbling around him in March 1945, Hitler now faced inevitable defeat. Discover how the Allies brought an end to the war in Europe and the downfall of history's most infamous dictator

NEW
FALL OF BERLIN
HOW THE ALLIES' BRUTAL AND BLOODY OFFENSIVE BROUGHT AN END TO THE WAR IN EUROPE
INSIDE
INCREDIBLE IMAGES, IN-DEPTH STORIES & DETAILED BATTLE MAPS
HITLER'S DEMISE
THE DOWNFALL OF NAZI GERMANY AND HISTORY'S MOST INFAMOUS DICTATOR
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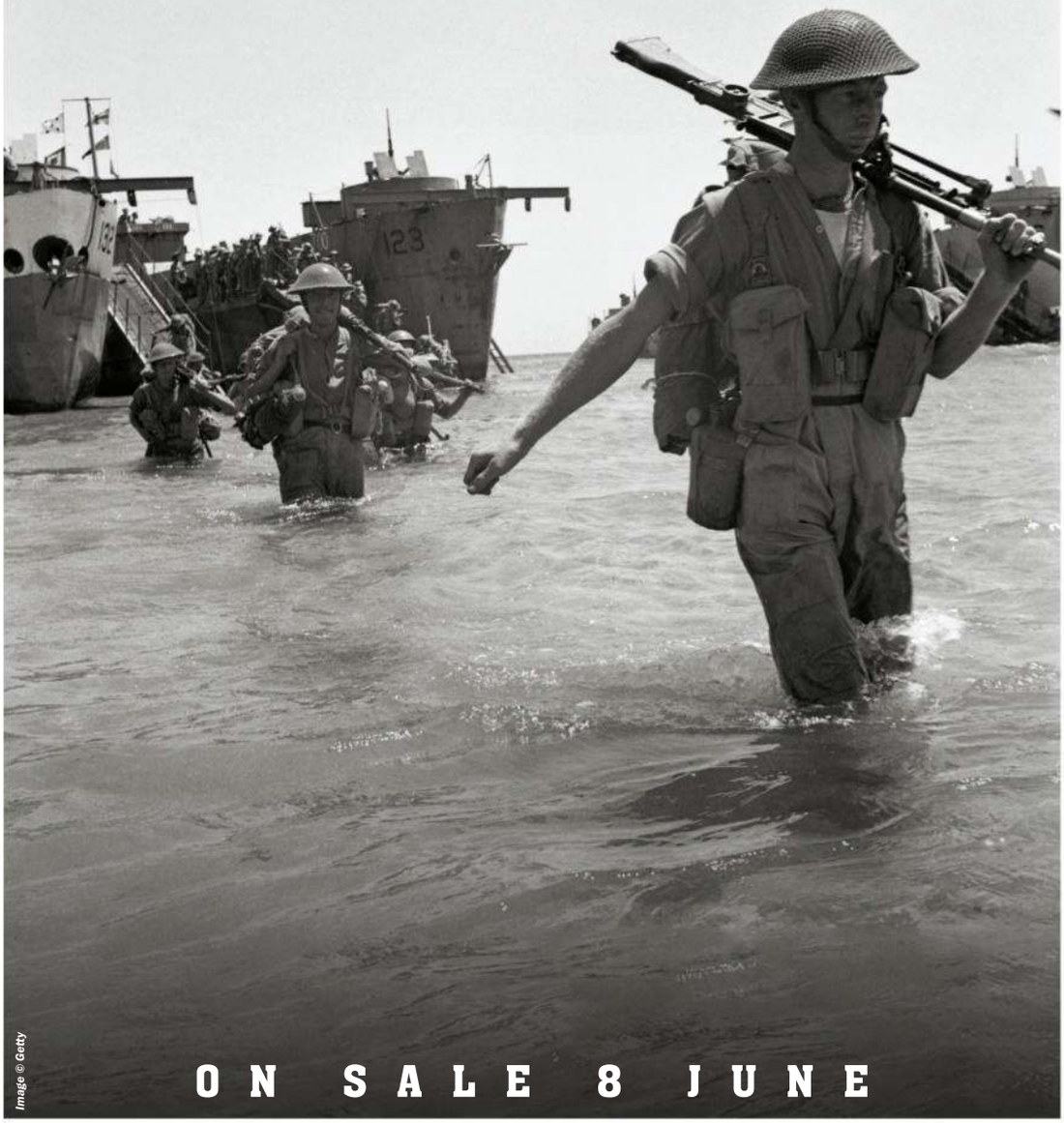

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Future PLC Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA

Editorial

Editor-in-Chief **Tim Williamson**
timothy.williamson@futurenet.com
Senior Designer **Curtis Fermor-Dunman**
Features Editor **Tom Garner**
Production Editor **Iain Noble**
Senior Art Editor **Duncan Crook**

Contributors

Edoardo Albert, Jonathan Gordon, Stuart Hadaway, Michael E Haskew, Dr Robert Owen, Marek Sobieralski, Nick Soldinger, Jules Stewart, Anthony Tucker-Jones

Photography

Alamy, Nicholas Forder, Rocio Espin, Getty

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Advertising

Media packs are available on request
UK Commercial Director **Clare Dove**
clare.dove@futurenet.com
Senior Advertising Manager **Matthew Johnston**
matthew.johnston@futurenet.com
07801 930735
Account Manager **Hayley Brailey-Woolfson**
hayley.baileywoolfson@futurenet.com
01643 678054

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TUSKEGEE AIRMAN JACKET

This leather flight jacket was worn during WWII by Woodrow W Crockett – a decorated USAAF pilot who flew with the legendary African American fighter and bomber squadrons

Active during 1940-48, the Tuskegee Airmen were a group of African American fighter and bomber pilots who fought during the Second World War. Serving in the United States Army Air Forces' (USAAF) 332nd Fighter Group and 477th (Medium) Bombardment Group, they were unofficially named after the Tuskegee Institute where they were educated.

The Tuskegee Airmen consisted of 922 pilots and were the first African American aviators to serve in the US Armed Forces. At a time when many African Americans were still subject to Jim Crow laws, the pilots suffered persistent discrimination. Nevertheless, they served with distinction in North Africa, Italy, France and Germany.

Sixty-eight pilots were killed in action or accidents across 1,578 combat and 179 bomber escort missions. The airmen destroyed 262 enemy aircraft along with over 1,000 ground vehicles, railway carriages and boats. They were awarded three Distinguished Unit Citations and many individual awards, including 96 Distinguished Flying Crosses.

***Above:** Woodrow W Crockett (left) and Edward C Gleed, 100th Fighter Squadron's commanding officer, in Ramitelli, Italy, during WWII*

Crockett donated his WWII flight jacket to the National Museum of African American History & Culture in Washington DC

"THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN CONSISTED OF 922 PILOTS AND WERE THE FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN AVIATORS TO SERVE IN THE US ARMED FORCES"

This leather flight jacket belonged to Woodrow W Crockett (1918 – 2012), an officer from Arkansas in the 100th Fighter Squadron, 332nd Fighter Group. He flew 149 combat missions during the Second World War and 45 during the Korean War. He retired in 1970 with the rank of lieutenant colonel. His many medals included the Distinguished Flying Cross, two Soldier's Medals for bravery in Italy and Korea, and the Air Medal with four Oak Leaf clusters. In 2007, Crockett was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal – Congress's highest award for national achievement – along with the rest of the collective Tuskegee Airmen.

NATIONAL MUSEUM of AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY & CULTURE

Woodrow W Crockett's jacket is exhibited in the National Museum of African American History & Culture

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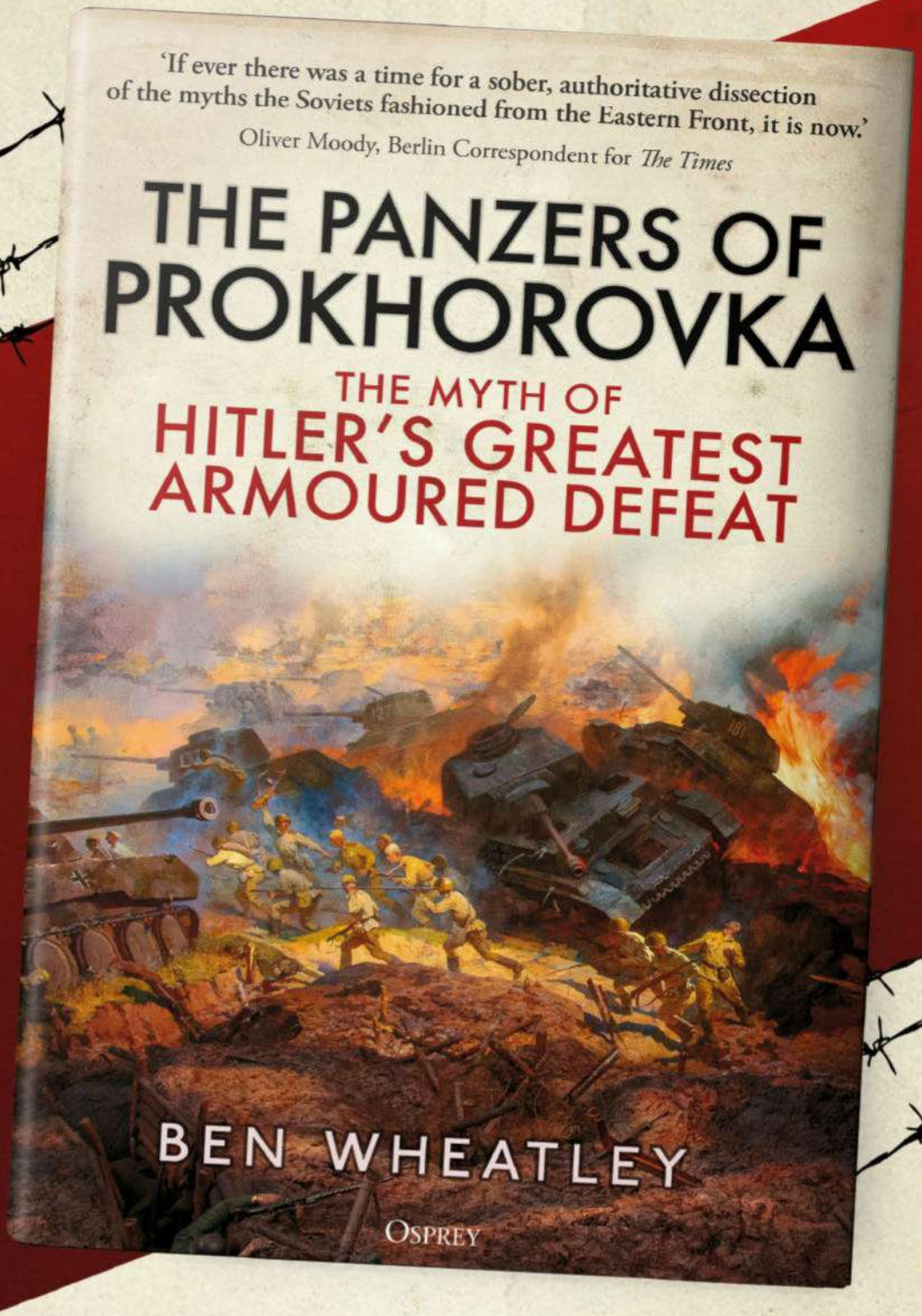
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